Historical Memory and Embodied Politics as Public Interventions in Amiri Baraka’s Slave Ship

Elizabeth Pittman

Slave Ship: A Historical Pageant, a one-act play by LeRoi Jones, now Amiri Baraka, was first performed and produced by The Spirit House Movers in Newark, New Jersey in 1967. The play first appeared in the Negro Digest in the April theater special issue of the same year. In an article titled, “What the Arts Need Now,” also published in that issue, Baraka argues that plays by black writers should “Show the chains. Let them see the chains as object and subject, and let them see the chains fall away.” He also calls for “[p]lays where history is absolutely meaningful and contemporary.” Slave Ship enacts both these requirements with radical effects. In this project, I focus on the 1969-1970 run of the play directed by Gilbert Moses and staged at the Theatre-in-the-Church by the Chelsea Theatre Center in New York City.

My discussion draws on archival responses to performances of the play, yet there is sufficient evidence within the text that reveals the radical directions Baraka takes drama, his audiences, and the kinds of work a literary intervention into the public sphere can accomplish. While the critical archive is limited, I build upon a brief review for TDR: The Drama Review by Stefan Brecht, as well as Kimberley Benston’s work on Baraka in his 1976 book, Baraka: The Renegade and the Mask, to argue that the play creates a memorial space where the barrier between spectacle and audience is dissolved. The final move of the play suggests that this memorial space is not confined to...
the theater, but is also a communal political sphere perpetuated through the politically active individual. Thus, I contend, the play’s focus on the body’s active position in a theatrical ship space provides an alternative narrative of the black body in American history and at the same time offers audiences a compensatory politics that acknowledges the specificity of embodied experience. Furthermore, by changing the theatrical space to resemble a ship’s hold, Baraka links the audience to the transformative sphere of the ship space by drawing on embodied experience, and by linking the audience members to an ongoing Middle Passage.

奴隶船”代表了巴拉卡职业生涯的一个转折点，他从活动家诗人转变为公共知识分子和激进民族主义者。巴拉卡的新兴政治意识形态在1969年是一个基于身份的政治，要求黑人美国人和非洲人民的自我决定。我对重新思考“奴隶船”在制定和格式化民族主义计划中的作用很感兴趣。巴拉卡的特定政治项目使用记忆来组织一个公共和创造一个基于情感联盟和共享记忆的集体。我将论证，巴拉卡既使用记忆作为有效的政治工具，也在一个新兴的和干预性政治中创造记忆。我将检查巴拉卡对中途岛的使用，以及在剧院空间中的船作为具体材料的转变点，以及他通过理论模型将历史记忆带到现在的途径。

The script for Slave Ship is a short text with lengthy stage directions and sparse dialogue organized into three scenarios and a song shared by actors and audience. It is difficult to distill the play into a brief plot synopsis because Baraka draws on so many cultural references throughout, that the play relies on a kind of vernacular expressionism, or the recognition of particular tropes. The play begins in Middle Passage, not on the Western coast of Africa, suggesting that the Middle Passage is the touchstone of black identities. The first stage direction reads in part, “In the dark. Keep the people in the dark,
Elizabeth Pittman

and gradually the odors of the ship, creep up...Urine. Excrement. Death. Life Processes going on anyway. Eating.” While the theater is still in darkness, the audience hears drums and chanting in Yoruba. The stage direction continues: “Rocking of the slave ship, in darkness, without sound. But smells. Then sound. Now slowly, out of the blackness with smells and drum staccato the hideous screams. All the women together scream.” On the ship a woman commits suicide, there is an attempted rape, intra-racial violence between captives, and inter-racial violence between sailors and slaves, male and female Africans comfort each other, women moan, there is “children’s crying in the hold, and the women trying to comfort them.” The sound of chains dragging across the boards mingles with songs and still more “moans of pushed-together agony.” Baraka seeks to convey a sense of the stifling oppression of so many humans closed in together, but also to acculturate, even assault, the audience to the movement, confinement, stench, and threat of physical violation during the Middle Passage.

I linger over the details of the script’s first few pages to give you a sense of the kind of environment Baraka envisions and the particular bodily experiences he desires to represent. Baraka’s stage-directions provide us with sufficient grounds for trying to understand how he wishes the performance to stage the traumas of the slave ship and to represent events which resist representation. Words like “agony,” “misery,” “lash,” “violated,” and “afraid” proliferate throughout the stage directions. The “Props” called for at the very beginning of the script include “Smell effects...incense...dirt/filth/smells/bodies” (1). These sounds: “Heavy chains,” “Ship noises/Ship bells/ Rocking and Splashing of Sea,” and later, “Whips/whip sounds” (1). “Chains, the lash, and people moaning” are specifically associated in the text with real bodies as the script calls for the audience to “Listen to the sounds come up out of the actors.” Actors must try to simulate the physical and emotional brutality of slavery, thereby transforming the theater. The human voice in pain is an important tool in the play. For instance, in two different stage directions Baraka requires singing (which is rendered: “hmmmmmmmmmmmmmm”) “like old black women humming for three centuries in the slow misery of slavery” and then, “like mad old nigger ladies humming forever in deathly patience.” Long screams punctuate the play frequently, and are rendered on the page
as sounds (“AAAAIIIIIIIIIEEEE”), to give you some idea of the idiosyncrasies of the text as well as the centrality of the voice. Moreover, screams, moans, and humming are often gendered female.

The play proceeds to a plantation where an “Uncle Tom” betrays his fellow slaves who have formed a plot to revolt which is hatched by a “Reverend Turner.” (Reverend Turner’s refrain is “We gon cut his friggin’ throat” (8).) As the gunshots of the revolt sound in the theater, the signs of the slave ship reappear over the revolt. The play then jumps forward in time and audience and actors sing together, after which a black preacher, an “Uncle Tom” who betrays his congregation and submits before a disembodied voice which is a surrogate for the white supremacist power structure. Music by Archie Shepp now incorporates “screaming saxophone” over drums. The play ends with the audience joining the actors in a song, “When we gonna Rise,” and finally with dancing. However, the song is not the climax of the production. Between singing and the concluding “party,” the black preacher is beheaded by a group of slaves. The last stage direction, and the final surprise of the play, has an actor throw the black preacher’s head into the center of the floor amidst the party of dancers, which now consists of everyone in the theater according to the direction.

*Slave Ship* is formally experimental, and the text’s organization reflects its avant-garde nature. The play is organized by historical epochs instead of acts, and scenes are differentiated not by the curtain closing, but by the lights dimming over singing or chanting. Kimberly Benston summarizes the moves of the play well when he writes that the “black passengers’ historical journey is from first enslavement to contemporary revolution, and whose mythical journey is from African civilization through enslavement to spiritual reascendancy” (243). This rewriting of the Middle Passage and historical reperiodization belie the progress narrative written in U. S. history textbooks of the post-bellum Reconstruction period by performing the past as present. While we must question whether the play seeks to aestheticize trauma, the power of the play depends upon an emotional currency that draws on shared fears and experiences of racial violence. For example, the script references the 1963 church bombing in Birmingham, Alabama. The aesthetization of feeling in the theater, its renewed centrality to the success of *Slave Ship*, represents
a material means of political activity and compensation not available to African-Americans in hegemonic print discourse and court rooms, or made invisible by the inefficacy of voting booths.

There aren’t any details about set construction in the script. It is therefore difficult to assess the extent to which Baraka controlled the visual aspects of his play. It is hard to know whether the set design, which integrates the entire theatrical space into the slave ship, might have been a collaborative decision between Baraka and Moses, or completely the director’s vision. During its run at the Theater-in-the-Church at the Washington Square Methodist Church, the play was performed in the chancel, which had been converted to look and feel like a slave ship. Foster Hirsch’s review provides invaluable details about the ways the event implicates the bodies of all present, either willingly or not. He writes,

The use of the stage space is as extraordinary as the acting. The whole theater has been converted into a slave ship. The audience sits on benches surrounding the stage, which is double-levelled. The top level slightly above the heads of the audience, is used for the deck of the ship and for the slave market; the bottom level, divided into four cell-like cubicles, represents the ship’s hold. The whole structure rocks to convey the motion of the ship. The actors also use small stages in the corners of the theatre, and the area in which the audience sits: no section of the theater is out of bounds. All of the walls are covered with wood panelling to resemble the wood of the ship itself. (103)

Hirsh’s description of the theater tells us that the audience is seated so that they are incorporated into the drama, but more than that, as witness-participants, they encase the action. Furthermore, the ascetic placement of the audience’s bodies organizes them in direct relation to the discomfiture and bodily proximity imagined as part of the suffering of the Middle Passage. One audience member recalls sitting on bleacher style risers and feeling immersed in the action of the performance (Railton). The placement of the audience’s bodies in relation to the actors is influential in establishing an empathetic bond between performer and viewer. The sweat on actors’ bodies is visible, and the proximity is conducive to identification with the performance of pain. Baraka intends this effect, as is evident when he writes, “We get the
feeling of many [sic] people jammed together. . .aching in the darkness.” The “terror” performed by these participants in the Middle Passage is projected throughout the theater and onto the bodies of the audience so that shock, discomfort, and possibly anger might be the most pressing emotions.

Baraka portrays the traumas of the Middle Passage—rape, families torn apart, the desecration of the body—as entirely personal for the participants. Not only, then, are audience members placed into the troubling space of sensory overload, but they are also pressed into the position of witnessing traumatic history inscribed as their own so that the bodies onstage do not simply dramatize the play’s action but they perform memories. Furthermore, by placing his audience members in the midst of an “atmos” that utilizes multiple senses, he desires the experience of the entire event, to be a simulacrum for a real experiential connection to slavery in order to develop an embodied ontology in which the past is housed in the African-American audience members’ bodies. Stefan Brecht argues that Baraka’s historical continuum of the play reveals Baraka’s belief that the audience’s condition is still that of “slavery” (215). He acknowledges the “risky business” of a play that posits “history as a wound.” By locating the audience member’s body in the ship, the site of revolutionary and transformative potential, Baraka is telling black audiences that the realm of the slave ship is in the present as is the force and potential of black revolution.

But how does the play form this Black American collectivity? Baraka does not desire emotional closure between present and past, which would forestall any inclination to public criticism or disavowal of the current legislative climate by instantiating an internal emotive response to the melodrama on stage. The play’s prolonged attention on the pain and vulnerability of the female body in the ship emphasizes the need for a communal response to the events as the male actors’ voices arise in protest. This use of the female body as a site for political affiliation is not a new tool, nor does it redefine the female body in relation to the Middle Passage, but it aids the play’s argument that a lack of proper response by black men makes them complicit with the current socio-economic stratification between black and white Americans.

It is important to question the ways Baraka employs the trope of the black female body as a site of suffering, employing strategies similar to sentimental novelists like Harriet Beecher Stowe or Lydia Maria Child or nineteenth-century free black writers like Frederick Douglass and Harriet
Elizabeth Pittman

Jacobs to invoke sympathy, for example. Why is the play so invested in the trope of the rape and suffering of black women? What powerful meanings attend this figure for the playwright? And does the trope affect audience members equally?

In the first third of the play women’s screams dominate the text, and Baraka intends for the actresses to portray their bodies as always vulnerable to the threat of rape by white sailors. Baraka wants there to be “Young girls afraid they may be violated” (4). This is a fairly incendiary stage direction, and it is hard to imagine how this fear might be performed. One wonders if actresses would cower and shrink their bodies, thereby signaling the need for protection. I would suggest that any identification with these bodies that takes place is not one of solipsism but commemoration. For example, listen to dialogue recounting an infanticide and the mother’s suicide. We learn of their deaths through the voices of “Man 1” and “Woman 1” who wail: “Man 1 – God, she’s killed herself and the chi child. Oh, God. Oh, God. (Moans. Moans. . . .);” and, “Woman 1 – She strangled herself with the chain. Choked the child. Oh, Shango! Help us, Lord. Oh, please” (5). Baraka seems to be saying to his audiences, “This happened to you. This is your history,” so that sympathy is not an option, but rather he constructs memory. The spectacle is rendered melodramatically, but the visceral nature of the audience’s connection with the events undermines a typical sentimental reaction to the spectacle of mother and child torn apart, the misery of which audiences are made to feel, but the possibility of a limited response like “feel[ing] right” is ultimately foreclosed by the intimacy of the performances. To participate in these events implicates the audience in an undesirable state of powerlessness to prevent a suicide, a rape, or even a betrayal, by extension commenting on persistent twentieth-century social immobility. Here the hackneyed trope of suffering mother and child becomes a political statement of collective belonging.

This articulation of the collectivity through these tropes enjoins individual experience with an ontology of loss and violation in a daring way. Baraka draws on the discursive positioning of the black body by the public sphere as always embodied, always laboring, and always exposed to the public gaze to reinstate a kind of sanctified public privacy of mourning in which African Americans can have the freedom to be safely embodied in the shelter of the performative space, which in the case of Slave Ship happens to be a church. (Interestingly, on Sundays, church services were also performed
on the set.) By holding the play in a church, the production is assured a ready-made and local audience. The church sanctifies loss, requiring an embodied response to the dramatization to form a collective of mourners that then lends the publicity of the event a radical authenticity by forming an insurgent, progressive public. Participation in this public actualizes a history Baraka believes has been stifled and stolen from African Americans in the heavily supervisory, policed public sphere of the American state.

In order to solidify audience cohesion after scenes of repellant violence and behavior, the play must perform a rejuvenating ritual. It does so through a song. The song stages a moment of powerful bodily unification, and when we recall that the play was performed in several theaters, its repetition instantiates pockets of dramatically embodied public activity. Each time the song is performed, a repetition of the time before but with new players, an assembly engages in a new form of discursive critique and self-organization that is profoundly manifested through performance. The lyrics dramatize Baraka’s poetics of becoming. Baraka writes,

```
When we gonna rise up, brother
I mean, when we gonna lift our head and voices
When we gonna show the world who we really are
When we gonna take our own place, brother
Show the world who we really are
```

Warriors-Gods, and lovers, The First Men to walk this star
How far, how long will it be
When the world belongs to you and me (13)

The song asks its singers to internalize a radical sense of unification and belonging to a self-determined public that is not content with the status quo.

By physically drawing the audience members into the performance, making their bodies enact the plan of the script, Baraka establishes a level of complicity which is exacerbated by emotional manipulation. Through the “aesthetics of feeling” Baraka invokes in Slave Ship, he exploits the vulnerabilities of his audiences to promote dialogue. When African-American spectators climb aboard the planks of the slave ship-stage and begin to sing, their voices generate a counter-argument to normative ideology.
Through *Slave Ship* Baraka not only demands and challenges black audiences to incorporate historical memory into an understanding of their present experiences, but he charges the body with the added responsibility of bearing these memories. By creating a theatrical space where the slave ship is imagined as present and still informing quotidian experiences of oppression in America, Baraka makes available the potential for participatory politics to audiences who have been excluded from the process. He extends the political efficacy of a collectivity organized around the ideas of diaspora and memory to those whose blackness allows them to form coalitions around these concepts and through affective alliances built by shared memories and shared bodily experiences.

In the *New York Times*’ “Drama Mailbag” for December 14, 1969, a letter to the editor, Samuel Friedland writes, “at the Chelsea Theater Center right now...theater is powerfully happening right now as a unique experience.” He continues to describe his “experience” of LeRoi Jones’ one act play *Slave Ship*, to which he brought his class of college English majors, as a powerfully engaging one. Friedland claims theater critic Walter Kerr’s assessment of the failures of Jones’ writing to create a moving theatrical production has “missed the boat” by describing his students’ reactions. He tells the paper, “Toward the end of the play, during the ‘When we gonna rise...’ refrain, many of my young black students were on their feet, swaying and clapping to the beat, totally involved.” He continues, “For whites and blacks the black experience is telescoped and unfolded from its early agonies to its present pride.” Clayton Riley, theater critic for the *New York Times* and *The Village Voice*, found the play invigorating for the way it acknowledges intra-racial discourses of blackness, and is critical of black audiences for not being more active in seeking self-determination. He states, “Jones puncturing any complacent citizen’s bag comfort or indifference. The confinement expressed in this experience extends to us like a cloak come to life, come to greet us as a vender of Black Magic.” Each of these spectators characterizes the play as an “experience” to which they are reacting and are inspired by. Friedland’s and Riley’s eloquent responses reveal the ways Baraka utilizes proximity, both to the performing body and to collective memory in order to challenge *Slave Ship*’s audiences toward more active political engagement.
Slave Ship has an interesting lack of place in the LeRoi Jones/ Amiri Baraka canon. It is somewhat troubling that a play about memory has almost been forgotten by academics and publishers. The difficulty of creating a performance history of a play due to the sparse textual record in many ways allows us to rethink the archive and question the formation of the Baraka canon. The critical and publication histories exist in stark contrast to that of Dutchman, for example. Dutchman is frequently taught in college classrooms, and its critical afterlife is vibrant, as a simple search on JSTOR indicates. Clayton Riley’s passionate response to the play tells us that the play was meaningful to its African-American audiences. Thus, its elision from the Amiri Baraka Reader is all the more mystifying and troubling. Furthermore, the disappearance of the play is interesting when one considers the frequency with which Baraka draws on the trope of the Middle Passage in public speeches given today. Further analysis of the play and research documenting its performance and cultural history both in the Black Arts period and in the twenty-first century would contribute to a more sophisticated and complicated understanding of Baraka’s career and his influence in shaping both Black Arts and the direction of postmodern American arts more generally.

WORKS CITED


