SEARCH FOR RACIAL AND SEXUAL IDENTITY IN AMIRI BARAKA’S
THE TOILET

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Abstract
African American Literature emphasizes mainly on the black people, their culture and history. The writers were sensitive realists who wrote on societal issues like culture, slavery, struggle for freedom and pleaded for equality. Almost forty-five years ago, Amiri Baraka examined the themes of racism and homophobia in his one-act play The Toilet. It served as metaphor for the current state of American race relations, sensationalized representations of Black masculinity to illuminate homophobic insecurities that couched issues of homosexuality in inter-racialist terms, and questioned racial reconciliation to show the intricate interplay of race, sex, and gender in the early 1960s.

The Toilet brought the social anxieties and power dynamics associated with Black manhood and masculinity to the stage with full force. Moreover, since the sexual questions and the racial questions have always been intertwined the youth characters’ homophobic understanding of the connections among race, gender, and sexuality goes hand in hand with the social and cultural politics of Black masculinity that undergirded the Black Power era.

The Toilet may be read as offering hope in that black and white seem to come together in the end, but one cannot overlook the representation of the fact that they inevitably come to blows first. The Toilet paralleled young Blacks personal/social power struggle to define and maintain their own identity in the midst of the revolving talks about racial equality. We must develop alliance with progressive black groups, organizations, and individuals to work together for the common good of the black community. The simple solution to hate is love, so simple we must revisit the question and solution from time to time.

Literature adds to reality, it does not simply describe it. It enriches the necessary competencies that daily life requires. It irrigates the deserts that our lives have already become. African American Literature emphasizes mainly on the black people, their culture and history. The writers were sensitive realists who wrote on societal issues like culture, slavery, struggle for freedom and pleaded for equality. Throughout American history, African Americans have been discriminated against and subject to racist attitudes.

Thematically, the social upheavals of the 1960s, 70s, and 80s particularly the civil rights and women’s movements, gay liberation, and the AIDS crisis, provided impetus for new plays that explored the lives of minorities and women. The attitude of homophobia predominates the African American community. In reviewing African American literature, one finds that black homophobic and heterosexist scholars believe homosexuality in the African American community is the result of: (1) the emasculation of black men by white oppression (2) the breakdown of the family structure and the loss of male role models (3) a sinister plot perpetuated by diabolical racists who want to destroy the black race and (4) immorality as defined in scriptures.

Too often the homophobia and heterosexism within the African American community forces men to be the “hardest hard.” They must nullify any feelings and emotions others may consider unmanly. To prove their manhood, they will often attack that which they fear in themselves. We should also include homophobia as another attitude that black males have adopted largely from the white culture.

Amiri Baraka is a controversial playwright, author, poet, activist, critic, and educator. His life has been a changing cycle through multiple philosophy and beliefs. He has been considered a literary genius among his peers and a man we all can learn from. A leader of the Black arts movement, Baraka’s numerous plays, poems, and essays inspired a generation of black folks to stand up because it was nation time (Black Nation). He constantly denounces homosexuality in his writings.
Almost forty-five years ago, Amiri Baraka examined the themes of racism and homophobia in his one-act play *The Toilet*. It is an ugly but affecting racial play. It was presented at St. Mark's Playhouse in a double bill with *The Slave*. *The Toilet* served as metaphor for the current state of American race relations, sensationalized representations of Black masculinity to illuminate homophobic insecurities that couched issues of homosexuality in inter-racist terms, and questioned racial reconciliation to show the intricate interplay of race, sex, and gender in the early 1960s. According to Baraka, since white men have black men doing their manual labor, white men have become estranged from actual physical work. As a consequence, white men are alienated from reality and nature. They have no real claim to manhood. Baraka characterizes white men as spineless, middle-class bureaucrats, and black men as natural super-strong studs.

Baraka tells us that the play is about the lives of black people. The set is a high school men's room, wherein he gathers a group of young men to decipher the meaning of love and hate. Mostly black, the young men appear to be at an urban manhood training rite. We see a myriad of personalities expressing themselves in the rhymes of the time—there are no pants sagging, no grills in teeth, but they are there seeking to discover their manhood, racial and sexual identity. *The Toilet* explored Black life, love, and social order.

The 1964 production of *The Toilet* intersected a critical moment when young Black men challenged social constructions of race, sex, and gender by defying white America and defeating white power. The history of racial oppression and domination continued to emasculate Black men and leave them competing against whites for positions of power, so race relations further constituted and complicated “Black” manhood. *The Toilet* challenged social stereotypes by reversing the usual power positions. The Black youth manage the happenings in the bathroom and drive the action of the play.

Critics questioned the play’s content, conclusion and casting that rendered mixed signals regarding the state of African American race relations. He used the culture of Black male youth as a backdrop for addressing issues of race and homosexuality particular to the 1960s. *The Toilet* presented Ray Foots, the main character, coming of age while struggling to come to terms with being both Black and homosexual. As a piece of Revolutionary theatre, the play also suggested that before Blacks and whites could come together, they would inevitably come to blows first. Critics did not know, however, that Baraka intentionally shaped the play’s conclusion to promote racial reconciliation.

The tragedy of that time and this time is that their search for manhood and sexual identity is unorganized and haphazard; thus then and now young men must grapple with self-discovery in isolated groups without mentor, elder or guide. No adult appears in *The Toilet* to give words of wisdom; thus the young men are adrift in their ignorance, seeking to find themselves in the midst of darkness. How ironic the setting is a high school where we assume learning is taking place, and yet learning occurs not in the classroom but the toilet. The toilet becomes the bush in African or primitive tradition, for there is terror, violence to bring transformation from hatred to love and interracial understanding.

A white boy writes a love letter to a black boy and the drama involves the resolution of this event. The white boy has crossed the racial line into the black brotherhood and suffers violence. As a result, he has beaten into a pulp, bloody as a beet, half-dead when brought into the Toilet. Gang violence is a natural happening in urban culture, senseless violence to express manhood; even sexual violence is a natural part of this oppressed society. And so the black boy is finally confronted by the white boy who loves him and the brother is physically overcome by the white boy to the chagrin of the black brotherhood. The white boy is again attacked by the toilet gang and all depart, including another white boy who had come to the defense of his white brother. The play ends with the black boy returning to embrace the white boy.

In *The Toilet*, the victim is a black boy named Ray Foots who cannot express his love for a white boy named Karolis because of what Baraka calls the brutality of the social order. Karolis, the white boy, is more obviously a victim than is Foots, the black boy. It is the white boy who is beaten. But the meaning of the play comes from Karolis’ revelation that the black boy he really loves is a hidden beautiful boy named Ray, not the Foots of this stinking toilet who is visible to his gang members. After Karolis is left bleeding on the toilet floor,
Foots sneaks back in, kneels by Karolis’ form and weeping, and cradles his head in his arms as he wipes the blood from Karolis’ face. For all of its ugliness, *The Toilet* is a play about love.

Ray Foots is the ultimate victim and revolutionary in *The Toilet*, for his coming of age hinges on his ability to overcome racism and homophobia and proclaim his Black, male, homosexual identity. Physically beating the white boy acts as a testament to the Black youth’s manhood. Thus, the Black youth showcase their social power through the intra-racial and inter racial proficient physical performance of Black masculinity. The Black community considers the projection of a strong racial identity to go hand in hand with masculinity:

*The Toilet* brought the social anxieties and power dynamics associated with Black manhood and masculinity to the stage with full force. In *The Toilet* Baraka clearly showed black masculinity securing its power by repudiating the (homosexual) other. The youth ultimately confront Karolis because they perceive his white homosexuality, confessed in the love letter he wrote to Foots, as a threat to their Black manhood. Moreover, since the sexual questions and the racial questions have always been intertwined the youth characters’ homophobic understanding of the connections among race, gender, and sexuality goes hand in hand with the social and cultural politics of Black masculinity that undergirded the Black Power era.

The teenagers seek to protect themselves and their same race peer group from white outsiders who disrupt the cohesion of their Blackness and threaten their power. In this, *The Toilet* expands the performance of Black masculinity beyond the cohesion of the group’s cultural community to address how issues of manhood spark racial conflict as well. *The Toilet* is certainly a play about tormented love. It is about a highly emotional love that is denied publicly then embraced privately, both literally and figuratively. Many critics interpreted the play’s ending as a coming together of Black and white, a moment of racial reconciliation.

*The Toilet* may be read as offering hope in that black and white seem to come together in the end, but one cannot overlook the representation of the fact that they inevitably come to blows first. *The Toilet* paralleled young Blacks personal/social power struggle to define and maintain their own identity in the midst of the revolving talks about racial equality. *The Toilet* challenged 1960s social norms in its depiction of Black youth culture and Black-white homosexual love. It stands a testament to Baraka’s artistic agenda to unveil and reverse the atrocities forced on both Black Americas and homosexuals by the white establishment, we must continue to return to *The Toilet*, just as Foots returns to the toilet to care for Karolis, and lay bare the love, hate, and hope the play presents across lines of race, sex, and gender. *The Toilet* is a state of mind, toxic and transfixed. It must be flushed clean with pure water. Let us flush ourselves and only love makes the day possible and the night bearable. If we join together in a “search for truth” that is mutually respectful of our differences, we will all benefit from the insights uncovered and the constructive criticism offered by each other. We must develop alliance with progressive black groups, organizations, and individuals to work together for the common good of the black community. The simple solution to hate is love, so simple we must revisit the question and solution from time to time.

**Bibliography**