

UNIVERSIDADE CATÓLICA PORTUGUESA  
DEPARTAMENTO DE LETRAS

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# MÁTHERESIS

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*In Memoriam*  
*Prof. Doutor Manuel de Oliveira Pulquério*

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## **BLACK ARTS AND WHITE DEVILS: THE THEATRE OF BLACK POWER**

MARY F. BREWER

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### **1. Introduction**

Politics, religion and art have always been closely associated in African-American culture. For instance, religious worship was one of the few areas where black slaves enjoyed scope for self- and social expression; religion offered them a unique space for vocalizing their desire for freedom, often hidden from their oppressors in reference to religious salvation in Negro spirituals. William Cook writes that the black church was designed to “fill a gap in the sociological and psychological life of Blacks.” It provided “a setting in which they could release their political energies, satisfy their desire for power and position, affirm their sense of specialness and worth, and find refuge from the uncertainty and terror of their everyday lives” (168).

In the modern Civil Rights Movement, the ideology of Black Power was cast frequently in terms of a new brand of religion, one that was more innate to black life than historical forms. Larry Neal defines Black Art as the aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept (“The Black Arts,” In Bean 55). Playwright and activist Amiri Baraka expands on this idea:

Art describes a culture. Black artists must have an image of what the Black sensibility is in this land. Religion elevates a culture. The Black Man must aspire to Blackness. God is man idealized. The Black Man must realize himself as Black. And idealize and aspire to that. ... The Black Man must seek a Black politics, an ordering of the world that is beneficial to his culture, to his interiorization, and judgment of the world. (*Raise* 248)

Since the Harlem Renaissance, the intersection of religion and politics has strongly informed the history of African-American dramatic writing. During the Black Power era, drama in particular

served as an important cultural forum in which black people could contest their political and social exclusion through the production and circulation of oppositional representations of American identity. Hence, drama came to be viewed by many political activists as an integral component of resistance. Playwright and activist Ed Bullins explains why drama came to be privileged as a means of protest over other forms of cultural production in the late 1960s:

I was busting my head trying to write novels and felt somehow that my people don't read novels. .... For the great bulk of them, they don't read novels. But when they are in the theater, then I've got them.... So I moved away from prose forms and into theater. ... now in the theater, we can go right into the Black community and have a literature for the people... (Marvin X, "Interview" viii).

Drama offered a form of communication that could help overcome class and educational differences in the black community, offering a more accessible avenue to political consciousness than other forms of literature. It did not require the same level of material resources as television or film media, industries in which black Americans had little purchase in the 1960s, and further, it offered an immediacy and visceral impact that other forms of oppositional literature might lack.

For Baraka, drama functions as an ideal vector of black politico-religious culture. In his influential treatise, "The Revolutionary Theater," he posits a dialectical relation between drama and lived culture:

The Revolutionary Theater must take dreams and give them a reality. It must isolate the ritual and historical cycles of reality. But it must be food for all these who need food, and daring propaganda for the beauty of the Human Mind. But it is a political theater, a weapon to help in the slaughter of these dimwitted fat-bellied white guys who somehow believe that the rest of the world is here for them to slobber on.

Baraka's thesis is an early elucidation of social construction theory in America, a premise often at odds with the author's own racial essentialism that is also a feature of much Black Power discourse. Nevertheless, what Baraka offers here is a paradigm whereby theater represents a social space in which the historical white construction of reality may be denaturalized. Baraka highlights the performative nature of lived culture. He writes: