

“Hopeless Colored Names” A Taxonomy of Naming and Re-naming Rituals in Baraka’s *Dutchman*

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Even as naming rituals stand among the most persistent themes in African-American literature, Imamu Amiri Baraka’s *Dutchman*, the most important play of the 1960s Black Arts Movement, is singular in the centrality of naming to its dramatic structure and meaning. From the profusion of over thirty-five different names, epithets, and appellations with which Lula (a young white female) and Clay (a young African-American male) manipulate and vitiate each other, we construct a taxonomy of three separate, interconnected naming rituals for analyzing the dramatic functions of naming in *Dutchman*: an Ethnic Cleansing Ritual, a Sexual and Gender Dissolution ritual, and an Existential Negation ritual. Each naming ritual reveals its own truth about the overarching conflicts of the drama and, in tandem with the other naming rituals, elucidates *Dutchman*’s links to its predecessors in both canonical African-American writing and modern European existentialist drama.

Naming and naming rituals stand as among the most persistent themes in canonical African-American writing which, as a body of work, is concerned with no single issue more than that of racial and self identity. As early as the 18th century Olaudah Equiano in *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African, Written by Himself* (1789) made a militant statement just in the title by asserting the primacy of his African name over his slave name. In modern canonical African-American writing, Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1952) traces the odyssey of a black southern assimilationist-turned northern-radical-activist who never utters (and, by inference, never truly hears) his own name. Malcolm X in *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1965) declares the casting off his slave name of Malcolm Little (and his

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short-lived street name of "Detroit Red") to be among the most revolutionary acts he could take in the struggle for freedom in America. Alex Hailey's *Roots* (1976) as both novel and groundbreaking television series established as its defining moment the scene wherein the resistant hero Kunta Kinte is whipped into accepting the slave name "Toby." Scholars of Toni Morrison's novels (and, in fact, Ms. Morrison herself) have commented extensively on the thematic importance of Biblical names for her characters.

In a case of life not simply imitating literature but superseding it as mythic cultural narrative, historians have conferred upon Muhammed Ali's 1964 decision to change his name from Cassius Clay the status of a turning point in twentieth-century American culture and the "first act" of what one Ali chronicler calls the "drama in five acts" that constitutes Ali's impact upon American life. (It is not at all insignificant that when *GQ Magazine* named Ali "The Athlete of the Century," they placed a full-page portrait of him on the cover but saw no need to print his name. Ali had not merely escaped the trappings of his slave name; he had transcended the limitations of naming altogether). [Williams, 2006: 9].

It comes as no surprise, then, that the signature play of the 1960s Black Arts Movement, Imamu Amiri Baraka's *Dutchman* (1963), establishes naming and re-naming of "the self" and "the other" as the weapons of choice in a deadly racial and sexual combat between Lula and Clay, respectively the play's warring white female and African-American male avatars. What does surprise is that, notwithstanding the profusion of scholarship on the importance of racial identity themes in the play and some discrete recognition that the two characters do, indeed, engage in "naming" as warfare, how little critical attention has been paid to the thematic and dramatic unity of the names, naming games, and naming rituals that arise from the play's principal conflict. Klinkowitz (1973) notes the casualness with which Lula verbally stereotypes Clay but does not explore the nuances of the different "types" with which she assaults him. Kumar (2003) affirms not only the centrality of ethnic identity to the play but argues persuasively that Baraka's vision of racial identity calls

for constant re-definition. But, concerned with other matters of interpretation, Kumar does not pursue a next logical step – an exegesis of the names and re-naming processes that lie at the center of the re-definition and re-identification themes she correctly identifies. In de-constructing the play as an Edenistic creation tale steeped in Christian typology Taylor (1973) is one of several scholars positing a Biblically allegorical reading of Lula's ominous offer to Clay of an apple. More importantly for matters at hand, Taylor argues for a symbolic reading of the racially ill-defined *Clay* (emphasis added) as invoking by his very name the grayish non-descript earthly matter from which God creates Adam. However, Taylor does not comment upon the grotesque caricature of the Genesis naming process that Lula and, if only defensively, Clay unknowingly parrot in their war of words. Solors (1978) deftly explains some of the play's associations with Lula's name and alternate identities (i.e., "Lena the Hyena" was the ugliest woman in a *Li'l Abner* cartoon beauty contest) but is more concerned with an expansive view of the play and its relationship to Baraka's other works in that particular discussion. Both McCoy (1998) and Martin (1977) observe that Lula's arsenal of invective and disparagement includes a distinctive place for naming. Furthermore, McCoy offers the intriguing observation that Lula's enigmatic warning to Clay ("I'm nothing, honey, and don't you ever forget it" [671]) identifies her as "someone who does not exist," even if the line is sufficiently paradoxical ('don't forget nothing') as to hint at an existential linking of being, naming, and nothingness.

It is our contention that many of the more influential and fruitful interpretations of *Dutchman* are strengthened and elucidated by a close examination of the types of naming rituals and patterns that emerge from Lula and Clay's racial and sexual battles. Furthermore, such an examination fortifies the connection between the play and the traditions of canonical African-American literature, supporting the emerging critical assessment that *Dutchman*, for all its brevity and incivility, is a masterpiece of modern African-American and American drama quite beyond its well-established status as an artifact of 1960s Movement radicalism.

In the course of the two-scene, 45-minute play *Lula and Clay*, strangers on a subway running under the ominously nameless yet unmistakable “city,” name-call and otherwise associate each other (principally) and reflexively themselves (frequently) with more than 35 different proper names, nicknames, personifications, epithets, and appellations – many of them repeated as often as six times. As much as any drama in American literature, this is a play of names and naming. Although *Dutchman* is transparently posed as a play about a girl-boy hook up initiated by Lula, (variously “Lena the Hyena, the famous poetess,” “Snow White,” “lady wrestler,” “Tallulah Bankhead,” “fake middle class white woman,” and “loud whore”), the fact that Lula and Clay are speaking to each other in the context of their respective races and genders is nearly as obvious to them as it is to us:

Lula: I bet your name is...one of those
hopeless colored names creeping out of
New Jersey.

Leonard? Gag...What right do you have to
be wearing a three-piece suit and striped tie?
Your grandfather was a slave, he didn't go
to Harvard.

Clay: My grandfather was a night
watchman.

Lula: And you went to a colored college
where everybody thought they were Averill
Harriman.

Clay: All except me...I thought I was Baudelaire.
(669-671)

Like the unseen Warren Enright, Clay's skinny black friend with the English accent that Lula conjures like a medium out of Clay's ostensibly private life, Clay by his name is a type – interchangeable with every other middle-class black benignly named and conservatively dressed.

That this is a play about the intersect of race and gender within American society -- rather than a play about one man and one woman trying to make an interesting night of it -- is without dispute among serious scholars as is the corollary that virtually everything of

significance said and done between Clay and Lula is contextualized in larger cultural thematic terms. So it is with the profusion of names and naming rituals that saturate their dialog.

Within the cacophonous spray of names and naming moments Baraka has constructed within the play, we denote a taxonomy of three distinct ritualistic functions for such moments: Ethnic Cleansing (ridding or confounding the racial and cultural identity of the self or the other through naming and/or re-naming), Sexual and Gender Dissolution (neutering, altering, or grotesquing the sexual identity of the self or other by naming and/or re-naming), and Existential Negation (denying by naming and/or re-naming the existence of the self or the other in absolute, universal terms that stand apart from gender, racial, religious, or other forms of cultural “self” and “other” identification). In the tradition of much of the African-American literary canon, negation of identity is a central, although not the only, purpose and consequence of all three of these naming rituals. And each serves its specific function within the drama.

In exchanging names and appellations within this taxonomy of race, sex and gender, and de-cultured universal existence, Clay and Lula perform essential socio-anthropological functions of naming on behalf of their “tribe” (respectively black and white race, male and female gender) in that they assert the identity of self (and by extension the tribe) by *naming* the self. In turn, they also serve the tribal function of overpowering the other (and by extension the other tribe) by *re-naming* the other. In that these functions are dispatched by Lula and Clay on behalf of the larger groups, naming and re-naming in *Dutchman* take on the force of tribal ritual performed by two warring Shaman.

The most prominent of *Dutchman*'s three naming rituals is that of Ethnic Cleansing, performed principally by Lula upon Clay. Notwithstanding her occasional lapses into seemingly pointless babble, Lula strips away at Clay's pretensions to black middle-class respectability in a strategically systematic manner. In scene one, she begins the naming ritual by exposing the most superficial and seemingly innocuous weaknesses in Clay's black identity -- the

likelihood that his “white middle class” dress and appearance signify that he has an Anglicized first name – one of the “hopeless colored names” suggesting strong roots not simply in European traditions but specifically in Anglo slave-holding ancestry:

Lula: I bet your name is...something...
uh, Gerald or Walter. Huh...Lloyd,
Norman?...Like Warren or Everett.
(669-670)

In response, Clay, who has not yet revealed his name to her, confidently fends off this easy chiding (“No...Gag”) but soon capitulates when Lula escalates the interrogation to the subject of his surname:

Clay: It’s Clay
Lula: Clay? Really? Clay what?
Clay: Take your pick: Jackson, or Johnson, or
Williams.
Lula: But it’s got to be Williams. You’re too
pretentious to be a Jackson or Johnson.
Clay: Thass right. (670)

From a naturalistic perspective, Clay’s self-mockery in presenting himself to Lula as a Jackson, a Johnson, or a Williams can be read as urbane self-effacing flirtatious banter. (Notwithstanding his open disdain for bourgeois naturalistic drama, Baraka writes first-rate naturalistic dialog when it suits his purposes to do so.) But when Clay says to Lula “take your pick,” he surrenders the integrity of his assimilated racial identity to her in the face of her interrogation. Just as the white master selected his ancestral surname (“took his pick”) however many generations ago, Clay unconsciously repeats the slave-naming ritual by granting with no resistance – and no self-awareness – the white woman’s power to re-consecrate his Anglo slave name. And there is no question that Lula “gets it” (“It’s *got* to be Williams.” emphasis added).

In scene two, Lula completes the ritualistic “cleansing” of Clay’s black identity, but here she abandons all pretenses to flirtation or obfuscation. As in scene one, assigning racially significant names to Clay is central to the ritualistic exorcism Lula performs against his

assimilated middle-class black persona. But instead of the banal suggestions of a distant slave past (Williams, Jackson, etc.) or vestiges of Euro-sophistication (“Black Baudelaire”), the names she invokes are by design the most virulent and de-grading in the lexicon of African-American racial epithets:

Lula: Screw yourself. Uncle Tom. Thomas Woolyhead. (*Begins to dance a kind of jig. Mocking Clay with loud forced humor*). There is Uncle Tom, I mean Uncle Thomas Woolyhead. With old white matted mane...Old Tom. Old Tom. Let the white man hump his old mama and he jes’ shuffle off into the woods and hide his gentle gray head. Ol’ Thomas Woolyhead. (676)

Elsewhere in this scene, Lula pelts him with the epithets “escaped nigger” and “dirty white man,” ensuring that her point is not lost. Clay responds to these assaults with his defiant, climactic “pure pumping black heart” speech wherein he “protests his authentic self” against Lula’s racial names and taunts (Klinkowitz, 124). However even in his moment of apparent liberation and through his howl of excoriation, Clay accepts and embraces the names that countless Lulas have foisted upon countless Clays throughout history:

Clay: If I’m a middle class fake white man...let me be. And let me be the way I want... Uncle Tom. Thomas. Whoever. It’s none of your business. You don’t know anything except what’s there for you to see. (676-677)

Lula’s completed ritualistic cleansing of Clay compels him to acknowledge that the “hopeless colored names” of Warren, Norman, Lloyd, Jackson, and Williams he and other middle-class blacks of his “type” take on as part of their racial identity in America are, in truth, of the same order of names as “Uncle Tom,” “Thomas Woolyhead,” and the rest of history’s slave-encrusted derogations. Lula’s naming has forced the truth out of him in unfettered yet impotent rage.

That Clay’s acknowledgement of the truth fails to set him free in any respect, as we will see below, is largely a consequence of the Sexual Dissolution and Existential Negation naming rituals that

Baraka has also infused within the play. Both of these rituals re-enforce the reductive power of naming so evident in the Ethnic Cleansing ritual but respectively contextualize the surface racial conflict in terms of sexual identity and existentialist universalism.

The intersect between gender and racial conflict within the play has been widely discussed by scholars and doubtlessly will continue to be so as the shifting landscape of American gender and race studies make this small, unlikely play ever more current. As a naming ritual, Sex and Gender Dissolution in *Dutchman*, by contrast to the Ethnic Cleansing ritual, presents the two contenders as nearly evenly matched. In Baraka's rituals of race, Lula as *white* tribeswoman can be scorned, despised, mocked, and slapped (and, indeed, Clay slaps her in scene two). But she cannot be intimidated, manipulated, or led in any way to self-discovery and change. Her white identity is immune to anything Clay can say against it or any name he can find to call it.

In the naming ritual of Sexual Dissolution, however, Baraka imbues Clay with a measure of power and, at least at first, a measure of parity with Lula. Despite his obvious vulnerability to her the black man has points to make against the rapacious grotesque sexuality of the white woman and commands a formidable arsenal of names with which to make them. As the alternately mundane and bizarre sexual pick up begins in scene one Lula, in addition to having initiated the Ethnic Cleansing ritual, launches the first sexual salvos as well:

Lula: Weren't you staring at me through the window? At the last stop?

Clay: Staring at you. What do you mean?

Lulu: Don't you know what staring means?

Clay: ...I don't know if I was staring. Seems to me you were staring through the window at me.

Lulu: I was. But only after I turned around and saw you staring through that window down in the vicinity of my ass and legs. (667)

But, as Baraka notes within the stage directions that follow immediately, Clay believes that she is engaged in "pure sex talk" – not understanding that she is masking other agendas and interests.

Even as he capitulates in the exchange about “hopeless colored names,” where Lula had him entirely on the defensive, Clay establishes himself as a presence in the early sexual by-play. In response to her painfully firm grasp of his wrists he grotesques her -- out of both shock at her strength and momentary revulsion at having a flirtatious, seductive moment interrupted by an affront to his presumed superior masculine physicality: “Wow, you’re pretty strong, you know. What are you, a lady wrestler or something?” (669). The rarity of women wrestlers in the early 1960s and their status as side show or even freak show attractions make of Clay’s remark more than a casual acknowledgement of Lula’s hand strength. It is, by the act of naming, a straightforward distortion of her sexuality and femininity. Clay has cut through Lula’s seductive beauty (Baraka describes her as “beautiful” in the opening stage directions) and named her as a sexual grotesque. Lula, in preparation for the climactic physical confrontation to which she is leading him, takes the bait and, by so doing, ritualistically arms herself with this de-feminized identity, implicitly accepting as her own its aggressive and enigmatic qualities: “What’s wrong with lady wrestlers? And don’t answer because you never knew any (669).”

The ritualistic de-feminization of Lula by Clay is followed immediately by a reciprocal emasculation of Clay’s sexual identity by Lula. As Clay assertively yet politely “works” Lula towards getting her to come with him to a party, she traps him:

Lula: Have you asked me yet (*to the party to which Clay is headed*)?

Clay: How can I ask you when I don’t know your name?

Lula: I am Lena, the Hyena.

Clay: The famous woman poet?

Lula: Poetess. The same!

Clay: Well, you know so much about me...*What’s my name?*

Lula: *Morris, the Hyena.*

Clay: *The famous woman poet?*

Lula: *The same* (emphasis added). (669)

Although this is a closer contest between them Lula, as she did in the early phase of the Ethnic Cleansing ritual, makes the winning move

in this naming ritual as well. Embracing the de-feminized “Lady Wrestler” identity Clay confers upon her, she maneuvers Clay into accepting an androgynous identity of his own, that of Morris the famous woman poet. Clay’s embrace of the female poet identity parallels his earlier embrace of the “hopeless colored names (Williams, Jackson, etc.)” in scene one and serves the same ritualistic function for the play: by naming him “Morris the famous woman poet,” Lula has feminized his sexual identity in the same manner that she had dissolved his black identity in the Ethnic Cleansing ritual.

Lula and Clay’s Sexual and Gender Dissolution ritual will culminate in the climactic physical confrontation at the end of scene two, when the newly named, masculated lady wrestler Lula, and the newly re-named feminized poet Clay/Morris will, in fact, do battle through the malformed androgynous identities they have just conferred upon one another. Clay as “famous woman poet” (his dissolute masculine identity working in tandem with his mutated racial identity, the Black Baudelaire) appears to free himself from the domination of the white woman with a torrential soliloquy (the aforementioned compelling “pure pumping black heart” speech) that functions dramatically as a stand-alone poem of black liberation:

I’m not telling you again, Tallulah Bankhead!
 Luxury! In your face and your fingers... And I
 sit here in this buttoned-up suit to keep myself
 from cutting all your throats. I mean
 wantonly...Belly rub (*a name Lula has given to
 sex, specifically interracial sex*) is dark places
 with big hats and overcoats held up with one
 arm. Belly rub hates you. Old bald headed four-
 eyed ofays popping their fingers...and don’t
 know yet what they’re doing...On that day, as
 sure as shit, when you really believe you can
 ‘accept’ them into your fold, as half-white
 trustees late of the subject people...they’ll cut
 your throats and drag you out to the edge of
 your cities so the flesh can fall away from your
 bones in sanitary isolation. (677-678)

The power of the speech is devastating in its length, emotional intensity, rhythmic construction, and imagistic flourishes. The famous poetess/Black Baudelaire rivets the reader and appears to have won from his white oppressor the freedom that presumably should be the entitlement of any African-American who speaks of revolution in racist America. Indeed, Clay is sufficiently taken with his own spontaneous burst of courage that he believes he has liberated himself from her grasp: "I guess I better collect my things and get off this train. Looks like we won't be acting out that little pageant you outlined before...Sorry, baby, I don't think we can make it" (678).

But Clay is deluded in his belief that he has "named" the white woman into submission with the superiority of his truth and the force of his poetry. Baraka views racial conflict, on this train and in America, not as a poetry slam but as a street fight in which a feminized poet stands little chance against a masculated lady wrestler. Responding to Clay's poetic fury in a "businesslike" manner, Lula rises up in the name of the grotesque de-feminized identities Clay has conferred upon her ("lady wrestler," enhanced by "Talluah Bankhead" [1930s era screen actress famous for her open bi-sexuality and sultry near-baritone voice that was deeper than that of many of her male co-stars], and Clay's other derogations of white women). She stabs him fatally in close quarters leaving him dying, "slump(ed) across her knees." (678.) The Sexual and Gender Distortion rite culminates as the masculated Lady Wrestler/Tallulah Bankhead outfights the Famous Woman Poet/Black Baudelaire to his death and orders the other passengers on the train – to a man and woman nameless and silent -- to "open the door and throw his body out."

The racial and sexual interplay of the action in *Dutchman* is arguably the most explored and analyzed aspect of the drama and is certainly one of the major reasons for its currency – a fact reflected in the close interplay between the play's Ethnic Cleansing and Sexual and Gender Dissolution naming rituals. Yet the play's endurance and growing stature owe a debt as well to its strong ties to the existentialist aesthetics of French "Theater of the Absurd" which

came of age in the 1950s and heavily influences western drama to this day. Rooted in writings of Camus and Sartre, the French existentialists' theater, epitomized in the "absurdist" works of Samuel Beckett, appealed to many contemporary American socially-conscious writers like Baraka and Edward Albee who viewed the "well-made plays" of commercial theater as both cause and effect of middle-class moral decadence. Like Baraka's *Dutchman*, existentialist drama is often characterized by circular action, imagistic repetitive language, and characters morphing into multiple identities while the play is in progress. Yet, paradoxically, the social revolutionary sensibilities of existentialist drama often appear to contradict themselves by asserting simultaneously that the damnable pointlessness of human existence is ultimately immutable: that the identities we assume through race, gender, or nationhood – and by extension the naming rituals we use to confer those identities upon ourselves and each other – ultimately obscure rather than define meaning. The existentialist's aesthetic philosophy, an approach to drama for which Baraka has expressed admiration throughout his career (Reilly, 1991: 247-248), is powerfully if subtly reflected in *Dutchman* – and makes its presence known through a naming ritual of Existential Negation.

Werner Sollors, who explores the existentialists' influence on Baraka more thoroughly than any other critic, astutely places the racial and sexual conflicts of the play in the context of Baraka's existential sensibilities:

The ending (of *Dutchman*) underlines those elements of the play which make it the portrayal of a hopeless situation in which the Clays and Lulas, as social masks rather than 'individuals,' are trapped. It is not, the ending, suggests a unique occurrence but a *rule* that *Dutchman* presents. In this respect *Dutchman* is more 'European absurdist' than for example ...Albee's *Zoo Story*. (1978:122)

Lula herself closes the first scene with what would be, but for the existentialist underpinnings of the drama, a seemingly incongruous

allusion to Camus' Meursault (*The Stranger*) and "Absurd Man" who transcend by force of will temporal and cultural identity to find themselves gazing or howling into the void:

Lula: And we will pretend the people cannot see you. That is, the citizens. And that you are free of your history and I am free of my history. We'll pretend that we are both *anonymous* (emphasis added) beauties smashing along the city's entrails. (*She yells as loud as she can.*) GROOVE! (672)

As Solors observes, the main action of the play – the interplay of racial and sexual conflict and, by extension, the naming rituals that arm that conflict – is framed in an existentialist context of eternal damnation -- a point further suggested by the name of the play, an implied allusion to the mythical eternal death ship the Flying Dutchman. Correspondingly, Baraka engages Clay and Lula in yet a third naming ritual, a ritual of Existential Negation that invokes the principles of existentialist drama and re-contextualizes the characters' momentous racial and sexual confrontations in culturally-neutered abstractions. The Existentialist Negation ritual appears at the very beginning and the very end of the play. Performed by Lula at Clay's expense, the Existentialist Negation manifests itself in her very first and very last act of naming him. First: "You look like *death* eating a soda cracker" (668); and last: "Get *this man* off of me (*emphases added*, 678)." As concerned as Clay is about his first name (Clay) and his last name ("It's got to be Williams"), ultimately his true first name, as conferred upon him by Lula, is *death* and his true last name is (this) *man*. In naming Clay as a universal abstraction (death man), Lula ultimately fulfills half of the existential vision she conjured at the end of scene one – she has freed Clay from his history and rendered him colorless, void, and absurd. Her existentialist vision is only half-realized, of course, since Lula will not free herself from her own history and join "death man" in the promised a-historical union of "anonymous beauties." As woman warrior to the white tribe, she will set upon another (and yet

another and another) young black male subway rider, whose identity she will systematically destroy through the performance of her fatal and *fatale* naming rituals. And, indeed, at the close of *Dutchman* this is precisely what Lula does:

(Closing Stage Directions) *Very soon a young Negro of about twenty comes into the coach, with a couple of books under his arm. He sits a few seats in back of Lula. When he is seated, she gives him a long slow look... (678)*

Here we finally understand the full meaning of Lula's enigmatic expression of nothingness uttered in scene one ("I am nothing, honey, and don't you forget it"). In the realm of the existential, negation does not equate with obliteration. In *Dutchman*, as in virtually all existential drama, identities of race, gender, religion, or nationhood can be affixed and removed as quickly as they can be named or re-named. To the extent that Absurd Man – or Absurd Woman or Absurd Black Man or Absurd White Woman – live in moments, those named identities have presence and force. In the moment they are variously empowering or debilitating, liberating or enslaving, revelatory or deceptive, provocative or mollifying. But outside of the moment and in the context of perpetual human existence those named identities amount to no more than the arcane and curious rites of obscure tribes – meaningless and incomprehensible to anyone who sits so much as one passenger seat away from the ceremonial site, unfamiliar with the language and unacquainted with the names.

They are nothing, honey. And don't you forget it.

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