

Initial Response to *Dutchman*  
Ian Notte

## 1. Positives

### Layers of Lula

One of the most enchanting aspects of the play is the layering of allusion. As Baraka advocated for a Black culture that was independent and counter to white culture, it places such an interesting tension with the lasagna of reference that is *Dutchman*. Lula alludes to many biblical women. She is Eva offering Clay apples and trying to seduce him. She is the Strange Woman from the biblical Proverbs as falling for her seductive wiles is the death of her young victim<sup>1</sup> and a score of others. She is such a deliciously referencing character. She appears to change as her actions allude to these and many other cultural hallmarks. But she is steadfast in her intention to destroy Clay.

### Seduction

Lula's seduction of Clay can be read an allegory for the seduction of the black middle class by white culture. They are promised to be the bedfellows of the white elite if they put on the airs of white society and reject militant Black culture. But just like Lula, the seduction is about the disempowering of Black people rather than achieving of equality.

### "Kiss my black, unruly ass"

Although the phrase didn't exist in 1964, Clay's description of black cultural appropriation by the white middle class still rings true today. He describes Charlie Parker or Bessie Smith as expressing a powerful anti-colonial message through their art. This could have been written about Black intellectuals now.

### The power of knowing and being unknown

Lula is never pinned down but she makes it clear to Clay at every turn that she knows him because she knows his type. She makes it clear that she knows he lives in New Jersey, has a skinny friend with a fake English accent and knows the political leanings of his parents.

## 2. Challenges -

### Poetic and profound stage directions

So much is conveyed in the stage descriptions, especially at the beginning. Much of the allegory of the Flying Dutchman is set up in Baraka's preamble that the audience never sees. How can this be conveyed to the audience? I recently saw a version of J.M. Barre's *Mary Rose* that had a narrator speak Barre's elaborate and poetic stage directions. I wonder if this might be a solution to this problem in *Dutchman*. If that does not fit with the production, the opening description should perhaps, be printed in the playbill.

### Lula the slippery story teller

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<sup>1</sup> Baker, Christopher. "A Trip with the Strange Woman: Amiri Baraka's *Dutchman* and the Book of Proverbs." *South Atlantic Review* 78 (2013): 110.

Lula first gives a false name “Lena the Hyena” who was a cartoon character of the ugliest woman in the world. She then says her name is Lula shortly after admitting that she “lies a lot.” From the outset she has reveals herself as an unreliable source of information. However, she drives the action to the climax. With such a slippery instigator, her intentions will be difficult to convey. It is ironic that she is the driver of the story in that she tells the audience about Clay because he is a type. It is part of her power play to know her opponent but never reveal her true self.

### Making it visible.

Most of the action happens while seated in a train car. Only at the end to they get up. How will this work on stage? There are some very important gestures and movements that will be hard for the audience to see. When Lula grabs Clay’s thigh, when she puts her head on his lap, and when she stabs him are just a few examples of this. Anthony Harvey’s film version breaks Baraka’s stage direction for Clay’s murder by placing it standing in the isle rather than the seat.

### Clear Physical Acting for Changing Tactics

The piece is certainly a riveting moment in theater in its own right but it is even more compelling if some of the allegory is conveyed to the audience. It does become as sort of game to see how many allusions one can draw. But this is also part of the challenge of the piece. Carrying the plot at the personal level of Lula and Clay’s struggle is essential, but conveying the layers of allusion is important in delivering Baraka’s political message. Clear and very intentional physical acting seems like a good way to delineate Lula’s changing tactics.

### **3. Questions -**

Why doesn’t Clay just move to another after the promise of sex has evaporated? Certainly calling a black man an Uncle Tom is fighting words. But why does Clay get sucked into such an obvious trap. Lula is so effective manipulated him to rage that he slaps her. She is then guaranteed that no one on the train will intervene in his murder. I think it might be effective if the audience can see this coming before Clay does. Making the slippery slope visible before the fall, can make the fall that much more uncomfortable.

The layers of allegory are stunning. Given how loaded the text is, I am sure there are layers I am not even aware of. What does each represent and why is it so hard to discern them one from the next? I am reminded of a candy jaw breaker, a hard candy too hard to bite that is consumed by dissolving layer after layer. It is likely that this reflects the apparently changing yet insidious nature of racism in the United States. How can the repetition, which even the title demands, be best achieved through the changing allegories?

Staging this play now poses unique challenges given the politics of feminism and the Black power movement. Although I reject it, there is some sentiment that feminism is at odds with Black power as manifest in Black Lives Matter. Accusations of “White middle class feminism” usurping or detracting from the success of black liberation are rampant. Because this play utilizes the tropes of woman as seductress and murderer it could easily be misread as misogyny. How can this be played to best address the issues of racial equality without opening the misogyny can of worms?

### **4. Crack/Thread -**

My way into Dutchman is through the allegories. It is such a powerful way to speak of current social issues without becoming heavy handed. The play is like a filo-dough pastry where there are layers and layers of allegory. This has both allowed it to stand the test of time by having something for everyone. Certainly it is very entertaining to watch Lula's constant yet evolving tactics to destroy Clay. But at a deeper level telling the story of the Black middle class's aspirations to be accepted into the folds of white power is like the the legend of *Flying Dutchman*. The train rumbles of forever without a stop and Lula is the terrible captain constantly seeking out new prey. And on a level deeper still, it was Dutch merchants who brought the first African slaves to Jamestown. Her attempt to seduce middle class black men alludes to both the book of Genesis and the original sin as well as the book of Proverbs in the seductress who will kill a suitor foolish enough to step into her trap.

The way that cultural appropriation fits in is also so layered, that it can speak to many levels of experience. Lula is likely a reference to "Be bop a Lula," a rock-a-billy song by Gene Vincent. A version was released shortly before Dutchman was written. Certainly Baraka's position as one of the preeminent critics of black music would have made him hyper-aware of the cultural theft of rock and roll from Black music. Lula has the sex appeal and seeming rebellion of rock and roll, which was yet one more thing stolen by white culture. But it is false, just like the cultural appropriation of Charlie Parker or Bessie Smith. White culture is not seeking equality with Black artists, simply another thing to steal. Even the train echoes the building of the railroad by coerced Black labor.

## **5. Audio and Visual moments -**

Looking through the window is so laden with possibility. Anything could happen. But something interesting certainly will.

The Empty train car is the perfect setting for a ghost and a murder.

The apple is a pretty loaded image for a seductress. Coupled with the phrase "It always starts with eating apples" really drives home the idea that a sin is about to happen

The description of the party as a frivolous affair where Black and white bohemians intermingle. The Black middle class are doing silly things at a time when militancy is required.

Description of going back to Lula's apartment as Juliette's tomb. This is of course where Romeo dies, but Juliette's death was false.

Suddenly there are other people on the train. The whole world is watching.

Demeaning Dances – the Nasty and belly rub followed by Lula's pole dance are reminders that white culture does not understand the grit and desperation that the Black arts grow out of. All the white people see is animalistic and sex- obsessed culture.

Bessy Smith and Charlie Parker wouldn't need to make revolutionary art if they were militants for the Black Power movement.

“Overcoats with big hats and an arm raised” is such a powerful image of something under the surface. It feels dangerous and unpredictable because the true identity and what is being held cannot be ascertained.

A little knife is all it takes to murder Clay. After Lula goads him to strike her, securing the support of the other passengers, nothing remains but for her to kill her middle class prey.

## **6. Concretes**

### The apple

As noted above, Clay is being seduced into sin.

### The First People

Starting play with spot light view and nobody but Clay and Lula. They are like Adam and Eva. The train is later populated with a lot of spectators. But none will stand up for the injustice and humiliation Clay endures, not even the Black riders.

### Middle Class Trappings

The books and newspapers that Clay and his successor (the young Black man at the end) signal that they are from the educated class of Black people.

### Pole Dancing

The crisis scene right before Clay snaps has Lula doing a sexual pole dance. This represents the objectification of Black people. They are accepted into white culture only in what they can do. They are objects of work, entertainment and even sex. But they are always objects.

## **7. Echoes, Repetitions, Returnings —**

Dutchman is a reference to the Flying Dutchman doomed to repeat forever. The final scene creates a spooky déjà vu new young black intellectual about to be consumed by Lula. The train is Flying Dutchman and the Dutch slave ship brought 1<sup>st</sup> slaves to Jamestown.

Lula’s seduction summed up in nine words: Lies and promises. Lies and promises. Humiliation and murder.

Apple and first sin. Sin necessitates intention. Clay’s sin is his turning his back on the Black Power movement with middle class collusion.

Act 2 mirrors Act 1 but it feels a bit less anonymous. Clay seems like he has a chance to achieve equal status, but Lula just leads her “wide-eyed” prey to destruction. She never gives up the power of knowing his type even though she doesn’t know him

Clay’s body is thrown out like her Lula’s apple cores.

The newspaper that Clay has and is echoed by the newspaper that he tears out of the hands of the rider during his rage. Both obscure the owner from what is happening. Clay can’t see Lula’s trap

because of his middle class aspirations. The newspaper signifies this. The rider literally uses the newspaper to not see what is happening to Clay.

## **8. Summary (WTPN):**

Great poetry and allegory are always timely. The rhythms of the piece are so evocative and the language so natural that its place in the canon of 20<sup>th</sup> Century drama is a given. However, the politics that it addresses are as relevant now as ever. Although it is neither legal or socially acceptable to deny services or credibility based explicitly on race, the effect is the same for much of the Black community. The racism has become embedded in class and geography. A good example of this can be seen in a common sociological fact of comparing salary to net worth. It is not legal to pay employees with the same job differently based simply on race. So much of the Black middle class will have salaries that equal their white coworkers. But if you compare the net worth, the average white family has eight times the net worth of the average Black family. This is largely a function of wealth inherited in the form of the family home. We are still seeing the effect of huge government subsidies for white neighborhoods from the 1950s and before<sup>2</sup>. As a result of this historic unequal footing, the enormous polarization of wealth and power that we are experiencing disproportionately disadvantages the Black community. The schools, neighborhoods and services allotted to them are often shockingly bad and underfunded. This has only fueled the tensions between the Black middle and working classes making them arguably as intense as they were in 1964.

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<sup>2</sup> Conley, Dalton. *Being Black, Living in the Red: Race, Wealth, and Social Policy in America*. 10th anniversary ed., with a new afterword. Berkeley, Calif. ; London: University of California Press, 2010.