

Return to *The Toilet* Melinda Wilson Ramey

Abstract

Set in a high school lavatory in the early 1960s, the first production of LeRoi Jones's *The Toilet* explored Black life, love, and social order. The pivotal one-act play received unfavorable reviews when it premiered off-Broadway in 1964 on a double bill with *The Slave*. Critics questioned the play's content, conclusion and casting that rendered mixed signals regarding the state of American race relations. Jones 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 Jones intentionally shaped the play's conclusion to promote racial reconciliation, and the production's use of nontraditional casting only caused further confusion.

Return to *The Toilet*

The Toilet is about the lives of black people. White people tell me it is not [...] They try to deny my version (and any black man's version) of American reality, on the stage, just as they do on the street. They insist that there is no reality except the poisonous numbness they are struck with (which they insist, yes they do, is beautiful).

The Toilet is also a play about love. And a boy's inability (because he is the victim) to explain that he is something stranger than the rest, even though the blood and soul of him is theirs. It is a play about social order, and what it can mean, i.e.: the brutality its insistence will demand, if it is not an order which can admit of any man's beauty.

– LeRoi Jones, *The Best Plays of 1964-1965*, 244

When LeRoi Jones's one-act play, *The Toilet*, premiered off-Broadway at the St. Marks Playhouse in December 1964, its locale, excessive language, and violence appalled critics.¹ The play showed a group of Black teenagers beating Jimmy Karolis, a white homosexual youth, then leaving him alone on the bathroom floor. George Oppenheimer (1964) of *Newsday* characterized the black youth as “a bestial collection of [...] savages.” Michael Unger (1964) of *The Newark Evening News* and Martin Gottfried (1964) of *Women's Wear Daily* bashed Jones for being “an angry young Negro author” whose “obsession with a single – and hopelessly childish – hatred

will prove ruinous to his art,” respectively. James Davis (1964) of the *New York Daily News* was so shocked that he left the theatre at intermission without seeing its companion piece, *The Slave*.² *The Toilet* perplexed many who saw its original production; they interpreted it as either a beautiful myth or meaningless harangue. I contend, however, that as a piece of Revolutionary Theatre, *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-racialist terms, and questioned racial reconciliation to show the intricate interplay of race, sex, and gender in the early 1960s.

The Toilet's off-Broadway premier received such horrific reviews because, as the playwright explained, it was both a play about the lives of Black people and a play about homosexual love, which, when coupled together, disrupted the social order that defined black-white race relations in 1964. *The Toilet* demonstrated “how fundamental aspects of our society (such as race, class, gender, and sexuality) operate to sustain matrices of power” in that it brought forth how intimate relationships reflect social norms whether positively or negatively (Moya 2000, 80-1). It is imperative to return to *The Toilet*, for the play presents multiple representations of Black masculinity, as one of the first pieces of Black theatre to present a Black homosexual protagonist in Ray Foots, the group's leader. Furthermore, returning to *The Toilet* fifty years after its first production yields an intriguing moment in theatre history. The play's social context, content, dramaturgy, and casting bring forth many interpretations and combine to elicit many questions: Was *The Toilet* about race, homosexuality, or both? How should audiences understand the play's final moment when Foots returns to the toilet, “stares at Karolis' body for a second, looks quickly over his shoulder, then runs and kneels before the body, weeping and cradling the head in his arms” (Baraka 1966a, 62)? Was Jones suggesting that Blacks beat whites to a pulp or was he saying that the two should come together? The play confused audiences because it displayed Black youth masculinity juxtaposed to interracial youth homosexuality at a time in America's history when racial reform overshadowed gay rights. Moreover, the production also exercised nontraditional casting when a Puerto Rican actor portrayed Karolis, which baffled audiences all the more.

The Toilet's page-to-stage production process – it was written in 1961; first published in 1963 in *Kulchur* literary magazine; and first produced in 1964 – coincides with Jones's development of Revolutionary Theatre. In his canonical essay, Jones defines *The Toilet* as a piece of Revolutionary theatre alongside *Dutchman* and *The Slave*.³ He calls for the complete destruction of the American social order through the production of Revolutionary Theatre and argues that Revolutionary Theatre should force and be change by exposing, accusing, and attacking the “ritual and historical cycles of reality” that perpetrate Black victimization (Baraka 1979, 211). 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.

All three of Jones's best-known revolutionary works were produced off-Broadway in 1964, the year that marked the beginning of the demise of civil rights movement and the slow ascension of Black Power.⁴ Ray Foots's identity formation parallels the struggle that Black Americans encountered in the 1960s, as they battled white power structures to eradicate racial

insubordination and discrimination. The year 1964 is of particular importance because peaceful demonstrators faced an escalation of violence at the hands of steadfast segregationists; civil rights activists grew more frustrated with the gradual pace of racial reform; and the southern movement to combat Jim Crow segregation moved north exposing racial injustices in America's urban cities.⁵ By the time *The Toilet* reached the stage at the end of that year, an identifiable shift in civil rights strategies was slowly underway with the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. *The Toilet* engaged critically and creatively the transitional period in America's political landscape when many young Black Americans recognized the federal government's commitment to upholding the racial status quo as an impediment of progress toward racial equality. Playwright LeRoi Jones was among the young Blacks who deduced from the escalation of civil disobedience and violence that white liberals were sympathetic to the civil rights cause in theory but not practice. *The Toilet*, like *Dutchman* and *The Slave*, served as a cultural precursor to Black Power by signaling the abusive and cyclical nature of purported racial reform.

The 1964 production of *The Toilet* intersected a critical social 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. For example, Jones described his role model, Malcolm X, as "a trigger, a maximum weapon of legitimate resistance" because Malcolm X exuded Black masculinity through his brilliant intellect, sharp wit, and incisive rhetoric (Baraka 1997, xi-xii). All of these attributes made it clear to Blacks and whites that "whatever else he was or was not—*Malcolm was a man!*" (Davis 1965, 524 italics in original). Because he refused to allow white society to disrespect him, stood up for himself, and died for his beliefs, Malcolm X "distinguish[ed] legitimate black masculinity against the [...] racialized stereotypes of the nonmasculine, the effeminate, the feminized and the feminine" (Harper 1996, x). *The Toilet* likewise 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. They establish control of the public/private space from the outset and empower themselves to act as the oppressors as a way of defying the current social order. Because the purported victims in the play, Donald Farrell and Jimmy Karolis, are white, the Black youth's transition from boys to men includes their ability to dominate the re-defined Other and reclaim their emasculated identity from the play's representatives of white society. Physically beating the white boys acts as a testament to the Black youth's manhood because "[m]anhood is deemed the ability to oppress by the white man" (Baraka 1966b, 218). Thus, the Black youth showcase their social power through the intra-racial and interracial proficient physical performance of Black masculinity.

The performance politics of Black masculinity code specific cultural practices that socially defined the youth as both "Black" and "male." As Philip Brian Harper proposes, the performance of Black masculinity constitutes issues of power in that the Black community considers the projection of a strong racial identity to go hand in hand with masculinity:

[T]he dominant view holds prideful self-respect as the very essence of healthy African-American identity, it also considers such identity to be fundamentally weakened wherever masculinity appears to be compromised. While this fact is

rarely articulated, its influence is nonetheless real and pervasive. Its primary effect is that all debates over and claims to “authentic” African-American identity are largely animated by a profound anxiety about the status specifically of African-American *masculinity*. (Harper 1996, ix; italics in original)

Depending on their expositional and onstage behavior, certain characters in *The Toilet* “appear to be” more “masculine” than others. Jones presents a diverse group of Black youth who express their masculinity in different ways. For instance, Jones describes Ora as “short, ugly, crude, [and] loud;” Willie Love “should have been sensitive;” Holmes is “bright, fast, [and] likeable;” and Knowles is “large and ridiculous” (Jones 1966, 35). Ora, who becomes the most aggressive as the play progresses, enters the toilet first. He “breaks through the door grinning, then giggling. Looks around the bleak place, walks, around, then with one hand on his hip takes out his joint and pees, still grinning, into one of the commodes, spraying urine all over the seat” (37). In contrast, Love is more refined as evidenced by his wiping the wet toilet seat clean before he sits (38). The youth have distinct personalities that mirror fluid understandings of Black masculinity in the 1960s social world.

The Toilet brought the social anxieties and power dynamics associated with Black manhood and masculinity to the stage with full force. The play’s “ideological drift from a sense of what is a boy to a sense of what is a man” was contingent on the youth successfully overpowering Karolis because he is white and because he is gay (Tener 1974, 207). In *The Toilet*, Jones clearly showed “black masculinity secur[ing] its power by repudiating the (homosexual) Other” (Johnson 2003, 55). 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” (Goldstein 1993, 42), 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. In the 1960s, Black Americans loosely regarded homosexuality as the “white man’s disease,” to disassociate themselves from same-sex desires as a way of refuting claims of cultural assimilation. In other words, to accept homosexuality was to concede to whiteness, so “national identity became sexualized in the sixties in such a way as to engender a curious subterranean connection between homophobia and nationalism” (Gates 1992, 79).

The homophobic rhetoric that saturated Black Power politics contends with homosexuality in inter-racialist terms, so homosexual desire becomes conflated with homosocial envy (Johnson 2003, 54). As a result, the relationship between Black masculinity and homosexuality is beset with contradictions. For example, in his reading of Eldridge Cleaver’s *Soul on Ice* (1968) performance studies scholar E. Patrick Johnson argues that Cleaver expresses his homophobia openly in disclosing his encounters with James Baldwin and “feminizes himself [...] like a repressed homosexual” by expressing a “desire for” Baldwin (Johnson 2003, 54-57).⁶ In the same way that Black Panther Party leader Huey Newton also “theorizes Cleaver’s participation in the Black Panther Party and his obsession with guns was an attempt to ‘prove’ his masculinity and assuage his homosexual desires,” Jones suggests

“homophobic repudiation became unspoken homosexual desire” in *The Toilet* (Johnson 2003, 54-7).

For instance, Ora exemplifies the machismo image to the extreme to shade his homophobic fear and suppress his homosexual desire. He is the one most intent on beating Farrell and Karolis. Ora acts on his own insecurities and gives credence to Newton’s explanation that “sometimes our first instinct is to want to hit a homosexual in the mouth [...] as soon as we see him because we’re afraid we might be homosexual” (Newton 2001, 281). Between punches Ora exudes his masculine power by standing over Karolis and taunting him with sexual innuendos. He says, “Hey, baby, why don’t you get up? I gotta nice fat sausage here for you” (Jones 1966a, 50-51). Love signifies on Ora’s seemingly innocent proposition for Karolis to “eat his sausage” stating, “Man, George, leave the cat alone. You know that’s his stick. That’s what he does (laughing) for his kicks...rub up against half-dead white boys” (50). Love twice insinuates that Ora is sexually attracted to Karolis. The second time follows Foots questioning what happened to Karolis:

PERRY. Heavy handed Big Shot again.

FOOTS. (*looks at ORA quickly with disgust but softens it immediately to comic disdain*) What the hell you hit him with, Ora, a goddam train?

ORA. (*happy at the notice of his destruction*) No, man, I just bopped him in the mouth with the back of my hand.

FOOTS. Ga-uhd damn! You a rough cat, Shot. He sure don’t look like he’s in any way to fight anybody.

ORA: (*laughing*) No, but he might be able to suck you off. Hee, hee.

LOVE: Shit. You the one that look like you want that, Big Shot. (52-53)

In this exchange, Ora takes pride in his blatant machismo display, and it is clear that this is not the first time he has taken it upon himself to instigate a fight. He apparently feels the need to prove his masculine prowess repeatedly, but he has yet to master his ability to mask convincingly his hidden desire. Love may be joking, but as is characteristic of the best signifying, his statements sting with additional meanings because there is an element of truth in them. The play suggests that the energy and anxiety required to discipline desire makes homosexuality constitutive of heterosexuality.

The Toilet is about the cultural lives of Black male youth who exude their budding manhood. Throughout the performance, they play the dozens, shadow-box, and engage in imaginary basketball games as if opponents when they are actually the best of friends.⁷ The St. Marks audience, because such expressions of Black culture were largely foreign to them, found the youths’ lively interplay crass and crude. One critic rightfully understood the play’s action as being age-specific:

Against the smelly and profane background of urinals and scrawled-upon lavatory walls we watch a bunch of Negro high school students as they demonstrate the insensitivity, the foul language, and the exercise of gratuitous violence one finds among groups of boys attempting to maintain tough-guy status and supermasculine virility [...] its deliberately redundant use of the sort of

unimaginative obscene vocabulary adolescent boys use to show that they are one of the gang. (1965)

Not all viewed the youths' language and behavior as negative, but rather as an intra-racial symbol of their coming-of-age identity. However, the fun verbal performance of Blackness subsides and the serious physical performance of masculinity prevails as the scene grows more intense. The bathroom demarcates the Black youths' domain, and the situation renders them the agitators and the white youth the victims. 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.

Two episodes, the presence of Donald Farrell and the long anticipated arrival of Jimmy Karolis, launch the Black youth into a hyper-performance of Black masculinity. First, Jones describes Farrell as "tall, thin, blonde, awkward, soft" (Baraka 1966a, 35). Jones links Farrell's race, distinguished by his light-colored hair and the dialogue, with his gender by suggesting that Farrell is effeminate with the adjective "soft." Moreover, since Farrell comes to the toilet virtually uninvited, he poses a greater threat because his presence disrupts their Black brotherhood and jeopardizes their plans. Ora makes it clear to Farrell that he is an unwelcome outsider with a swift punch in the stomach, yet Farrell is spared from a severe thrashing because he is not suspected of also being gay.

The youth's hyper-performance of Black masculinity helps to secure the boundaries of Black heterosexuality. For example, Knowles and Skippy take pride in their defeat of Karolis; it is imperative that they receive recognition for doing so when they first drag him into the toilet:

KNOWLES. Love, now what the hell does it look like we did? Broke this muthafucka's jaw.

HINES. Damn. I thought we were just bringing the cat down here to fight Foots. I didn't know you guys were gonna break his head first.

SKIPPY. Well, he didn't wanna come. We had to persuade him.

KNOWLES. Shit, Skippy, whatta you mean "we?" I did all the persuading.

ORA. Aw, shit, Knowles. I bloodied the cat's lip. You trying to take all the credit.

SKIPPY. Yeh, Knowles. You didn't hit the cat but once, and that was on the goddamn shoulder. (Baraka 1966a, 49)

Karolis has not personally offended any one of the teenagers present. Still, the young men's hyper-masculine performance, strengthened by the teenage rush of testosterone that accompanies moments of anger and excitement, surges literally to crush any semblance of homosexuality. The Black youth gathered in the toilet are not actually questioning Foots's sexuality. Rather, they are daring Karolis's audacious proposition that blatantly disrespects Foots's manhood, and by extension their own Black masculinity.

The Toilet shows the personal stress Foots undergoes because he is "different" from his peers. He struggles to rectify his race and sexuality; he faces double victimization because he is

both Black and gay. "Foods" prevails in the social presence of the Black youth, yet "Ray" emerges when alone with Karolis. Now, in the presence of Blacks and whites, in the boys' basement restroom, Ray and Foods, two seemingly separate identities, are forced to come together. The play's very setting is a secret, bathroom basement location that is both public and private; it alone yields many connotations that suggest the happenings in the bathroom, i.e. the fight itself and Foods and Karolis's relationship, are "dirty," "defiled," "underground," and meant to remain "hidden."

In the cast of characters, Jones describes "Foods" as the "[p]ossessor of a threatened empire" (Baraka 1966a, 35). As the leader of the Black brotherhood, he is charged with maintaining their racial and gender autonomy. Karolis's letter implicates the young black Foods in homosexual desire, and since the social connotations of white male homosexuality purportedly compromise Black male heterosexuality, the racial implications surrounding the situation communicate that the white man once more emasculates and dis-empowers the Black man. It is Foods's social duty to defend his/their manhood. He, as the subject of the letter, must fight Karolis to offset the letter's homosexual overtones.⁸ The challenge for Foods, however, is that the letter's implications are not false, and since masculinity in no way coincides with homosexuality in the Black youth's 1960s social order, he does not know how to reconcile the two for the appeasement of all involved or himself.

Ray Foods enters the toilet last. The sequence of events, mostly delineated in stage directions, unfold quickly to prove that "Foods" is secretly and intimately involved with Karolis. The first time Foods sees Karolis cradled in the corner, for example, he reacts with "horror and disgust. . . but he keeps it controlled as is his style [...] He goes over to Karolis and kneels near him, threatening to stay too long. He controls the impulse and gets up and walks back to where he was" (Baraka 1966a, 52). This moment shows Foods's affection and yearning for Karolis, but he must maintain his composure. If he allows the other youth to detect his feelings for Karolis, then his charade will end. He is truly concerned about Karolis's condition, but he has to proceed as if he could care less. Foods consciously shields his homosexuality; he must decide whether or not to reveal it publicly, for being openly gay in the Black community may have dire consequences. James Baldwin, writer and civil rights activist who left America for France largely because of the dual discrimination he faced as a Black homosexual, describes the "terror" homosexuals are forced to endure in the following:

It's very frightening. But the so-called straight person is no safer than I am really. Loving anybody and being loved by anybody is a tremendous danger, a tremendous responsibility [...] The discovery of one's sexual preference doesn't have to be a trauma. It's a trauma because it's such a traumatized society [...] Terror [causes people to hate homosexuals], I suppose. Terror of the flesh.
(Goldstein 1993, 42)

Similar to Newton, Baldwin suggests that Black homosexuals face such contestation because society projects their fear onto them, which makes it dangerous for gays to love openly another man. *The Toilet* represents this danger in relating the physical and psychological trauma a Black youth suffers from his fear of embracing his homosexuality. After all, "[a]dolescence is a time when most people first consider their own sexuality, and hence their own sexual orientation. For

those who believe they are lesbians or gay men, this can be a very perilous time” (Rubenstein 1993, 156). Foots already sees firsthand the damage done to Karolis for being homosexual in a society traumatized by terrors of the flesh, and he believes his homosexuality will likewise elicit aggressive reactions from his peers and negate his Blackness.

Foots’s reaction to the situation signals the ways he too performs aspects of his identity. His performance, however, is peer pressured by the Black youth and carried out to guard his closeted homosexuality. The fight jeopardizes Foots’s relationship with his peers as well as his relationship with Karolis. When he finally “comes in. He is nervous but keeps it hidden by a natural glibness and a sharp sense of what each boy in the room expects, singularly, from him” (Baraka 1966a, 51). Foots’s nervousness stems from his recognition that the truth about his relationship with Karolis can be divulged at any second. He does not want any harm to come to his lover, yet his friends are expecting their fearless leader to rise to the occasion and not only fight Karolis but win indisputably. Jones explains in his autobiography that fighting serves as a rite of passage:

Fighting, avoiding fights, observing fights, knowing when and when not to fight, were all part of our open-air playground street-side education. And fights were so constant, a kind of *staged event* of varying seriousness. Sometimes very serious. Sometimes just a diversion, for everyone. (Baraka 1997, 30, italics added)

The reiterated behaviors that encompass the constructed performance of masculinity to establish power relationships make fighting a “staged event” that Foots wants to avoid because the social dynamics that precipitate the event do not reflect his true feelings. Moreover, his “prevailing cultural crisis” adds complexities to his identity formation as explained by Cornel West:

This situation is even bleaker for most black gay men who reject the major stylistic option of black machismo identity, yet who are marginalized in white America and penalized in black America for doing so. In their efforts to be themselves, they are told they are not really “black men,” not machismo-identified. (West 2001, 306)

Because Foots does not wish prove his machismo by fighting Karolis, he must perform alternative acts to support his masculine identity. His repeated attempts to call off the fight suggest that his own gendered identity is, what Judith Butler terms, “an ongoing discursive practice [...] open to interventions and resignification” (Butler 1990, 33). Foots puts forth multiple pronouncements to change the situation thereby constructing his own masculinity in relationship to the other Black youth. His masculinity manifests in part by his commanding authority over the situation. For instance, he acts scornful when he says, “There wasn’t any need of bringing the cat down here if you guys were gonna fuck him up before I got here. He was suppose to fight me” (Baraka 1966a, 53). Foots pretends to be angry with the group because they challenged his authority by not following his instructions; they cower in his presence and search for justifications switching the blame from one person to another. Moreover, presumably, he is upset with himself because he might have been able to stage the fight and protect Karolis had things gone according to his non-verbalized plan.

Foots possibly intended to stage the fight with Karolis to appease the Black youths and prevent any serious injury. This would have also enabled him to maintain his dual “Ray” and

“Foods” identities. Since Ora and Knowles took matters into their own hands, however, Foods must reassess quickly. Again, he tries to end the fiasco:

FOOTS. Well, I don’t see any reason to keep all this shit up. Just pour water on the cat and let’s get outta here.

ORA. What? You mean you made us go through all this bullshit for nothing?

FOOTS. Well, what the hell am I gonna do, beat on the guy while he’s sprawled on the floor. Damn, Ora, you’re a pretty lousy sonofabitch...I’m pushed! There’s no reason to stay here. I can’t fight the guy like he is. (53-4)

Ora claims that Foods owes them for all their hard work and anticipation. They took the initiative to defend his honor by bringing Karolis to the toilet, so he must show his appreciation. Foods almost manages to finagle his way out of the fight until Karolis, slowly standing to his feet and mustering some strength, speaks up:

I’ll fight you, Ray [...] I want to fight you [...] Yes, Ray, I want to fight you, now. I want to kill you [...] I sent you a note, remember. That note saying I loved you...The note saying you were beautiful...You remember that note, Ray? [...] The one that said I wanted to take you into my mouth. (FOOTS *lunges at KAROLIS and misses.*) Did I call you Ray in that letter. . .or Foods? (*Trying to laugh.*) Foods! [...] That’s who I want to kill. Foods! [...] I’ll fight you. Right here in this same place where you said your name was Ray. (*Screaming. He lunges at FOODS and manages to grab him in a choke hold.*) Ray, you said your name was. You said Ray. Right here in this filthy toilet. You said Ray. (*He is choking FOODS and screaming. FOODS struggles and is punching KAROLIS in the back and stomach, but he cannot get out of the hold.*) You put your hand on me and said Ray! (56-60)

Karolis remains steadfast in his position amidst the commotion from the other boys. He uses the expository contents of the letter as a weapon to provoke “Foods” to acknowledge “Ray’s” existence. The issue at hand is not the note, but their homosexual relationship as documented by the note that Foods now wants to deny before his friends. Karolis may understand Foods’s dilemma, but he does not condone his lack of integrity. Karolis asks whether he is “Ray” or “Foods” directly in the exact same underground space where they initiated their relationship.

The Black youth cannot relent their power to the white gay teenager. Once they realize that Karolis is indeed “trying to kill Foods,” the “whole of the crowd,” including Perry and George who tried to defend the white boys, overtakes Karolis (Baraka 1966a, 60). Their Black masculinity ultimately manifests itself in the pummeling of Karolis, and the seriousness of the scene wavers from person to person. Ora leads the punches and Knowles screams with laughter as they pulverize the defenseless Karolis who pleads, “No, no, his name is Ray, not Foods. You stupid bastards. I love somebody you don’t even know” (60). Karolis is the only one who recognizes that Foods is more than who others perceive him to be, yet he is also the one punished for their dismissal of the fact that Foods is a Black homosexual; he still puts his own life on the line for his lover. Karolis bears the brunt of the attack, but both gay youth, Karolis and Foods are victims of homophobic violence, Karolis physically and Foods, at this point, emotionally. Both search for someone to cherish and be cherished by because society responds to their sexual

preference in terror. However, Ray/Foots is more victimized by society because he endures the double stigma of being both gay and Black for the most part in silence. Even Huey Newton contended that “homosexuals are not given freedom and liberty by anyone in this society. Maybe they might be the most oppressed people in the society” (Newton 2001, 282). Because he is also Black, Fooks is dually victimized by racism and homophobia. His identity categories are multiplicative, so his experiences yield specific and additional consequences as the sum of both parts.

Karolis demands that Fooks claim his homosexuality in presence of his Black buddies. Karolis and Fooks are simultaneously mobilized and paralyzed by their feelings of anger and betrayal. The crowd eggs them on as they deliberately enclose the area around them. Fooks is the first to make contact, but he “fights like a girl” because he delivers a weak open-handed slap. In one swift and simultaneously performed moment, Karolis reaches his breaking point; strangles Fooks; reveals the intimacy of their relationship and the depth of his pain; verifies Fooks’s attraction to him as he recalls their first meeting; and earns complete control of the situation. The onlookers fail to pay attention to the confession because they are so aroused by Karolis’s actions that they disregard his words. The Black youth ignore Karolis and beat him until his limp body is unmoving on the bathroom floor. Fooks, on the other hand, does not participate in the beating of Karolis. He never lays another offensive hand on him; Fooks remains oblivious to what is happening once released from Karolis’s stronghold. He is physically unable to do anything. In *The Toilet*, Karolis meets his objective to kill Fooks. Fooks, the Black machismo youth, neither speaks again nor reappears. It is Ray, the compassionate lover, who returns.

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. Ray Fooks’s acceptance of his Black homosexual identity concludes the play. The hesitation and immediacy of Fooks’s physical actions communicate his true feelings. He pauses before running to Karolis’s side, but the extent of the delay between the character’s exit and reentry conveys, in part, how much Fooks cares for Karolis. How quickly does he dodge (or does he even dodge) the others and come back once he realizes what has happened? Interestingly enough, Fooks does not compromise his Blackness by being intimately involved with Karolis because Jones does not show him rejecting his racial identity or disassociating himself from his Black friends completely. Jones does, however, show him embracing his white male lover most definitely. Fooks’s cradling of Karolis signals his acceptance of his Black homosexuality. Fooks comes of age in making this very bold decision, especially after witnessing his friends’ response to homosexuality. The afternoon’s encounter leads Fooks to acknowledge his homosexuality and overcome his fear of it. This, Baldwin argues, is intrinsic to a mediated Black experience:

Well, there is a capacity in black people for experience, simply. And that capacity makes other things possible. It dictates the depths of one’s acceptance of other people. The capacity for experience is what burns out fear. Because the homophobia we’re talking about really is a kind of fear. It’s a terror of flesh. It’s really a terror of being able to be touched. (Goldstein 1993, 44)

Experience, whether safe or traumatic, renders the acceptance of self and others. Fooks’s need to be loved and touched by the one person who welcomes him without pretense or performance supersedes his fear of being homosexual. Fooks lets go of his inhibitions, and his final cradling of Karolis signals his embracing

his homosexual self. However, this is still an intimate and private moment between the two youth. The question as to whether or not Ray Foots acknowledges being Black and homosexual remains to be seen because as far as the audience can tell, Foots's normative Black heterosexuality is still maintained outside the toilet. This leads me to ask: What happens after the curtain falls?

Foots must exit the toilet again in order to claim publicly his Black homosexuality. Does he walk out of the public/private toilet space and into the public space with Karolis? Does Foots acknowledge his private life by literally and figuratively "coming out" of the toilet with his lover by the hand? In the end, the setting of the play comes full circle. Where else can the two go that will provide public announcement of their private affair? *The Toilet* was produced prior to the Stonewall Riots (June 1969) that sparked the gay rights movement after police raided a gay bar in Greenwich Village where same-sex liaisons frequently occurred in public restrooms, and Karolis plainly states that their relationship was initiated and almost terminated in this same private/public space where Foots first touched him and told him his name. It seems that in the social moment of the play, the boys' bathroom, located in the school basement secluded from and beneath everything else, is the disturbingly idyllic public/private space for Foots to explore his homosexuality and to come to terms with his changing identity. In the toilet, the relationship between Ray and Karolis is secret, private, and personal, but it exists nonetheless. The next step is for Ray Foots, the Black homosexual youth, to step out of this private world and into the public sphere where issues of race, sex, and gender permeate the social landscape.

In holding his lover in his arms, the final moment of the play suggests that Ray Foots comes of age by embracing his homosexuality albeit still only in private; his coming of age remains in process. The play's situation in some way prepares or prompts the main character also to acknowledge his Black homosexuality publicly. However, there are multiple ways to interpret the play, especially considering its ending. For instance, Foots may return to the toilet to assuage his guilt, but it may not be that simple. He is morally culpable for allowing the beating of Karolis to happen in the first place, so he returns, in effect, to apologize. He may help his lover to his feet, clean his face, and kiss and hug him all the while saying he is sorry for the turn of events, sorry for treating him badly. If this is the case and Foots indeed has no intention of acknowledging their relationship publicly, then the next question is: How many times has this happened? How many times have the two youth met and embraced in private only to have Foots disavow Karolis in public? How many times has Foots told Karolis that he plans to come out of the closet and then, when an opportune moment like the one that just passed presents itself, renege on his promise?

An alternative reading of the play's conclusion reveals a cyclical moment rather than the precise ending of a private or beginning of a public relationship. Foots and Karolis may be involved in an abusive relationship characterized by repeated episodes of emotional or physical violence that are then followed by intense apologies and displays of endearing compassion. Moreover, if the ending represents a pattern of abuse signaled both by the violence inflicted on Karolis and by Foots's own traumatic struggle to reconcile his Black homosexuality, then the play's social implications also shift to create new meanings. Reading their relationship in terms of abuse parallels the patterns of abuse Black America felt in regards to the civil rights struggle. Jones flips the script, so whites are now abused by Blacks, but similar sentiments abound: How long will it take for legalized discrimination to end? When will the government acknowledge

their role in the escalation of violence? Who is responsible for personal/social pain? *The Toilet* serves as a metaphor regarding social order, especially since the final moment is not the play's original ending.

According to Jones, *The Toilet* originally ended with all the Black youth leaving Karolis alone on the bathroom floor. Jones explained:

The ending is peculiar because I tacked it on [...] If you ever look at the manuscript you'll see that the manuscript stops at the end of the fight. But then I sat there for a while thinking, was that really the way it had to end? [...] Well, the whole thing needed some kind of rapprochement—there was a question of wanting to offer that kind of friendship that existed across traditional social lines. (Bigby 1994, 130-1)

Jones further explained that *The Toilet* reflected some of his personal inhibitions at the time of his writing the script. He argued, "I was working my way through some things I didn't understand—for instance, the ending of *The Toilet* where there is a sort of coming together of the black boy and the white boy [...] actually did not evolve from the spirit of the play" (Watkins 1994, 91). Rather, when Jones wrote *The Toilet* in 1961, he was living on Manhattan's Lower East Side among many white friends and with his white wife. Jones himself best explained, "Well when I think of *The Toilet* I just think of it as the product of a particular time and place and condition as far as my own development was concerned" (Bigby 1994, 131). Did Jones feel somewhat personally obligated to conclude the play with a hint toward racial reconciliation so as not to offend or "threaten" his own white social network. He claimed, "that kind of ending seemed more appropriate to me at the time" (131). Many critics interpreted the play's ending as a coming together of Black and white, a moment of racial reconciliation. This interpretation is founded, and it yields the further coming together of all social identities. James Baldwin, for instance, argued that if racism is ever eradicated then the end of sexism and homophobia will follow (Goldstein 1993, 42-3), and Huey Newton called for the Black liberation movement to unite with the women's and gay liberation movements "in a revolutionary fashion" (Newton 2001, 281). These sentiments apply to the social ideologies of the Black Liberation movement period because the civil rights struggle gave way to the sexual revolution and the Gay Liberation movement of the 1960s and 1970s. *The Toilet* upholds these domino-effect ideas about social change if and only if the closing portrait is read as optimistic.

Like Clay in *Dutchman* and Walker in *The Slave*, all of the Black youth in *The Toilet* including Fouts are all revolutionaries in that they challenge outright the dominant power structure. Unlike *Dutchman* and *The Slave*, however, *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. Jones originally intended to conclude the play with Black claiming victory over white. Furthermore, since *The Toilet* preceded *The Slave* on stage, the message of the latter piece helps shape that of the first because the final moments of performance leave lasting impressions in audiences' minds. This is evidenced by the fact that *The Slave* received more attention in reviews than *The Toilet* and some reviewers even seemed to conflate the plays because they considered an altercation in a boys' high school restroom to be more disturbingly violent than the actual murder that takes place

in *The Slave* against a civil war backdrop. Jones purposely and doubly armed Black Power politics with *The Toilet/The Slave* billing. *The Toilet* was in fact a warning, like Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time* (1963), that the revolution was coming.

By the time *The Toilet* reached the stage, its ending actually engaged a social order that was far from offering acceptable resolutions to the state of race relations. As discussed earlier, by the mid-1960s growing numbers of young Black Americans felt trapped in an abusive cycle with white liberals who continued to make and break promises about racial reform. The federal government's passive involvement in the civil rights struggle garnered more and more cynicism. Young Black radicals became annoyed with the apparent failures of the civil rights movement and felt changes in the social system would not take place unless it was in the best political, economic, and social interest of the white establishment (Carmichael and Hamilton 1967, 75). *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.

In representing machismo Black youth prevailing over whites, *The Toilet* advocated Black Power practices just before its upsurge. Black Nationalist groups like the Black Panther Party that came to pose "the greatest threat to the internal security of the country" by the end of the decade intentionally and successfully projected the non-accommodating machismo image because "[w]ithin the radical definitions of self and nationhood espoused by the Black Nationalists, masculinity was the unquestioned norm from which any deviation was regarded as a betrayal of the race" (Churchill 2001, 95) (Plum 2001, 240). *The Toilet* engaged the percolating sentiment that an uncompromising and unapologetic Black male identity spoke to racial unity. The play premiered in a political moment when issues of race, sex, and gender were quickly being brought to the discussion table. By the end of the 1960s, the interrelationship of race, sex, and gender continued to underscore Black liberation movement discourse as exemplified by Newton's proclamation that "there is nothing to say that a homosexual cannot also be a revolutionary. And maybe I'm now injecting some of my prejudice by saying that 'even a homosexual can be a revolutionary.'" Quite the contrary, maybe a homosexual could be the most revolutionary" (Newton 2001, 282). Accordingly, Ray Foots, a Black male homosexual, is a Black Revolutionary whose personal identity incites social change.

As mentioned earlier, *The Toilet* warranted mixed reactions and interpretations, when it opened in 1964. Walter Kerr of the *New York Herald Tribune* was one of the few critics to write a favorable review of the play and actually read the social implications of the homosexual relationship between Foots and Karolis. He wrote: "In the contemporary revolt of black against white, love must be hidden, denied, fouled," which shows he recognized Foots's reciprocated affection for Karolis in personal and social terms (Kerr 1964). Other critics approached to the issue of homosexuality with denial that ranged from subjective scorn to obvious reserve. One referred to Foots as the "object of this *unnatural* desire" (Oppenheimer 1964, italics added). More than a few observed that the play ended on a simple note of "compassion" and "tenderness" when Foots "takes pity on [Karolis] and attempts to ease his pain" (Taubman 1964, Davis 1964, Cooke 1964). Describing Foots's cradling of Karolis as a compassionate, tender, or pity-inspired moment dismisses the intimacy of their relationship because these descriptions imply the move is sympathetic or an external reaction to an impersonal stimulus.

The final moment is an expression of empathy because Foots hurts for and with Karolis. As his lover, he shares his pain, and he feels enormous remorse for being the one most responsible for it. In addition, the play's racial conflict overshadowed its homosexual aspects, but several critics were still unsure what to make of *The Toilet* even when they tried to interpret it in "Black and white." Whitney Bolton (1964) of the *Morning Telegraph*, for example, was so confused by the racial conflict that he simply acknowledged, "It bewilders me." In the theatre world, Jones seemed to be "a playwright of great talent" and "the most outspoken writer today on the white-Negro conflict" (Gottfried 1964, Little 1964), yet he also appeared to depend on shock tactics to convey an unclear point (Taubman 1964). What message(s) was Jones really trying to convey?

Finally, the first production of *The Toilet* presents an interesting case study for nontraditional casting as well. In addition to the obscure tacked on ending, casting choices further confused audiences and skewed the play's black-white racial implications as a whole. A few reviewers regarded the play's "victim" as a "Puerto Rican boy," for Puerto Rican actor, Jamie Sanchez, originated the role of Karolis. This observation is distinct from stating that a Puerto Rican actor played a white character. To some extent or another, audience members misread Sanchez's ethnicity for the character's race. Sanchez had a growing repertory of Broadway and off-Broadway stage credits including *Oh Dad, Poor Dad, Mamma's Hung You in the Closet and I'm Feeling so Sad* (1963) and *Conerico Was Here to Stay* (1965), so his surname and face were recognized as Puerto Rican. Sanchez also played "Chino," Bernardo's best buddy and avenger, in the 1957 Broadway premier of *West Side Story*, another coming of age drama rooted in racial conflict with youth performances of hyper-masculinity. In their own machismo rooftop performance, for instance, the Sharks musically proclaim, "Life is all right in America / If you're all white in America."

In exercising nontraditional casting for *The Toilet*, the play shifted from depicting Black versus White to Black versus Latino, which muddled its message. Casting discrepancies between the script's representation and critic's interpretation of the character are especially peculiar since "Leo Garen's direction of the off-Broadway production matched the action perfectly" (Guernsey 1965, 244). The play's action clearly revolved around Black/white racial conflict, so why cast a Latino actor? What did it mean to white America in 1964 when persons of color turned on each other? How were they to comprehend an already complex representation of race if the picture was distorted? Nontraditional casting proved ineffective for *The Toilet* because racial identities are pivotal to the script and conflict.

Despite or perhaps because of the many controversies surrounding its premier, *The Toilet* enjoyed a successful run. As delineated in a series of press releases by Howard Atlee, Jones's personal press representative, the original production drew sell-out audiences on the weekends and decent crowds during the week. Ticket sales more than doubled after producers announced the shows would close on March 21, 1965. The closing date was then extended on a week-to-week basis. The initial production of *The Toilet*, along with *The Slave*, ran off-Broadway for more than four months and approximately 150 performances before officially closing on April 25, 1965.

The Toilet challenged 1960s social norms in its depiction of Black youth culture and Black-white homosexual love. Moreover, the issues brought forth in the play remain topics of discussion today – fifty years after its off-Broadway premier. Race relations and gay rights remain at the forefront of public debate. For instance, Barack Obama, our nation’s first Black president announced his support of gay marriage in May 2012 after years of only upholding civil unions. Was the president’s move a ploy to gain gay/lesbian votes and win re-election, or are we finally living in the “equality and justice for all” moment that both Newton and Baldwin predicted? *The Toilet* also presented a high school restroom as a public/private space for identity (re)formation. Today, California's highly contested School Success and Opportunity Act allows transgendered students to use the school bathroom of their choice thereby confirming the idea that youth can freely express their gendered identity in a public bathroom. I find it intriguing that the bathroom itself plays a pivotal role as a site for the negotiation of multiplicative identities. Because *The Toilet* stands a testament to Jones’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.

NOTES

1. I refer to the playwright as “LeRoi Jones” to emphasize the fact that *The Toilet* was written and produced one year prior to him officially changing his name to Amiri Baraka, which signaled his complete embrace of Black Nationalism in 1965. In other words, as will be delineated, the play is historically situated in a transitional period in Jones’s personal life as well as America’s social fabric. Furthermore, LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka passed away in January 2014 when this article was in process. This article gives credence to *The Toilet*, a pivotal piece of dramatic literature and Revolutionary Theatre that is overshadowed by *Dutchman* and *The Slave*. The play shows his ongoing commitment to unveiling the truth about Black America.
2. *The Toilet* was double-billed with the premier of Jones’s seminal work *The Slave*, but later published in 1966 with *The Baptism* that also has homosexual themes. Scholars often consider *The Slave* in conjunction with its publication partner, *Dutchman*, but *The Toilet* is actually its performance companion.
3. Jones wrote “Revolutionary Theatre” for publication in the *New York Times* the exact same month that *The Toilet* premiered, but the newspaper refused to print it. Of Jones’s Revolutionary dramas, *Dutchman* took the stage first in March of 1964; but *The Toilet* actually opened the doors of the theatre to Jones beforehand. According to Stuart W. Little (1964) of *New York Herald Tribune*, Richard Barr and Clinton Wilder were influenced to produce *Dutchman* after reading *The Toilet*.

4. *Dutchman* was still in its nearly eleven-month run at the Cherry Lane Theatre when *The Toilet*'s teenage cast took the stage. Between December 16, 1964 and February 6, 1965 all three plays were in production simultaneously. This unusual overlap continued to grant Jones recognition in the professional theatre arena and expose his representations of the social realities of race to a more mainstream, i.e. white and male, audience.

5. A chain of events in the early 1960s steadily prompted young Blacks to demand, "Freedom Now!" by the decade's midpoint. They watched as Martin Luther King, Jr. and the minister-based Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) compromised with the Kennedy administration to ensure the safety of Freedom Riders (1961) rather than insist that segregated interstate travel end immediately. They witnessed the brutality of white police officers warding off nonviolent demonstrators with fire hoses at full blast and arresting numerous Black school-aged children during King's attempt to confront segregation practices in Birmingham, Alabama (April 1963). Birmingham's "Project C" and the "Children's Crusade" prompted Kennedy to propose the Civil Rights Act of 1964, but it took more than a year for it to go into effect. In the meantime, young Black activists and innocent Black youth including National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) field secretary Medgar Evers (June 1963); the victims of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church bombing Denise McNair, Cynthia Wesley, Carole Robertson, and Addie Mae Collins (September 1963); Freedom Summer volunteers Andrew Goodman, James Chaney, and Michael Schwerner (June 1964) and many unknown others continued to lose their lives in the name of civil rights without justice being served.

6. Johnson's study of Black male heteronormative performance also includes an examination of select writings by LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka. Baraka's personal attitude toward white men and gays is suspect considering his often cited 1966 comment, "Most American white men are trained to be fags" meaning that white men are so estranged from social reality and reliant on technology that they become weak, effeminate, and soft (Baraka 1966b, 216). However, I contend that Baraka's position and understanding of masculinity changes overtime as did his politics. In his pre-Black Nationalist work, *The Toilet*, Jones forms a relationship between whiteness and homosexuality, but Foots does not necessarily disavow whiteness for the sake of securing his Black masculinity.

7. Jones's inclusion of boxing is extremely apropos in that Cassius Clay, the most controversial and prominent sports figure of the 1960s, simultaneously personified and tested the performance politics of Black masculinity. *The Toilet* premiered the same year that Clay defeated Sonny Liston to become the new Heavyweight Champion of the World; the same year that Clay announced his allegiance to the Nation of Islam by changing his name to Muhammad Ali. Jones's stage directions describing the youth's imaginary boxing match are reminiscent of Clay's antics. Jones admired Clay for his playful, consistent, cocky, poetic, and unapologetic performance of Blackness.

8. No textual evidence suggests that Foots instigates the plan to beat Karolis. Rather, it seems that the other Black youth contrive the scheme and coerce Foots into it. How they gained access to the letter that incites the incident is also not disclosed. It is unlikely that Foots handed it over voluntarily. Did someone in the group intercept it? Plus, it is clear that the other youth insist that

Foots fight. Everyone except Foots is ready to bout, but the main character arrives late to the scene. If nothing else, his tardiness and procrastination prove he is a reluctant participant in the planning and execution of the event. Foots tries to resituate the fight by making himself a diversion to the confrontation.

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