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ORCID# 0000-0003-0337-4641

An Appreciation for Amiri Baraka: Remembering a Remarkable Voice in American Literary History

Dike Okoro

Introduction

Amiri Baraka was indeed one of America's greatest writers and, in fact, it would be amiss for me to eschew my personal contact with him in the 1990s. Our paths crossed during the 1998 Gwendolyn Brooks Writers' Conference in Chicago, when a fellow graduate student and I were selected by Chicago State University's literature program to perform Robert Hayden's "Runagate Runagate" as an opening act to what would later amount to a spirited and emotional speech/poetry reading by Baraka. I have cherished the opportunity and remain ever so grateful to have graced the same stage with an author of such monumental stature. His contribution to black literature and the American literary tradition is unparalleled. He is accredited as the co-founder of the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and "one of America's most important literary figures" (Chideya). Indeed, like many great writers, Baraka had his regrets during the later years of his career but seemed to have handled them appropriately before he passed away. In the introduction to his glowing book of essays, *Home: Social Essays*, he admits, "One heavy and aggravating problem with [my] early writings is that I've long since changed my views on some topics" (15). He prances through several examples, specifically noting his indulgence in Marxism, admitting: "For instance, the homophobic language in several of the essays … is wrongheaded and unscientific" (16). This shift from his rhetoric in the 1970s, for good reasons,

suggests what many great writers have pointed out about writing and its influence on the writer. Perhaps this seems to be what James Baldwin attempted to explain when he observes, "Unless a writer is extremely old when he dies, in which case he has probably become a neglected institution, his death must always seem untimely. This is because a real writer is always shifting and changing and searching" (604). I agree with Baldwin. Perhaps when Baraka's corpus is re-examined to situate his influence on writers from the younger generation and writers belonging to other literary traditions but whose hindsight parallels his, he will be remembered as one poet, playwright, essayist and cultural spokesperson, whose voice and visionary commitment helped in settling anxieties in what is today recognized globally as American literature.

Baraka was born in Newark, New Jersey in 1934, and attended Howard University, Washington DC where he met the notable poet, Lucile Clifton (Hollins). To date, he remains a writer whose versatility made it difficult for critics and scholars to locate his penmanship within a particular genre. Admired for his penetrating and insightful essays on music, in particular jazz, Baraka's passion and critical perspectives on jazz musicians have been well received over the years. In fact, *Kirkus Review* claims that "[Baraka] is at his best when writing about jazz musicians." He has authored numerous books, including the play *Dutchman* (1964) and books of poetry, *Preface to a Twentieth Century Suicide Note* (1961) and *The Dead Lecturer: Poems* (1964). As a poet and activist, Baraka shifted in ideology on numerous occasions and this trend affected his writings which took on many issues and changed with time. Recognized as the pioneer voice of the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s, many of Baraka's contemporary keenly asserted their views of him when pressed to reflect on his legacy. Etheridge Knight, in an interview with Charles Rowell, the editor of *Callaloo Journal*, situates Baraka within the role of the political artist, contending, "If you are a black artist in this country, at this time, you cannot help but be a politician" (qtd. in Betts 12). Sonia Sanchez remembers Baraka in the same spirit of the artist who saw art as a political tool, stating, "And one of the things that [Baraka] wrote is that…the function of art [is] to give us light, to let us fly, to let us imagine and dream, but also to create, in the real world." And that is what our dear brother did" ("Remembering").

Sanchez's allusion allows me to begin to look at Baraka's

monumental stature in African American literary tradition as a gift to the younger generation who saw in his early poetry the highest level of craftsmanship that must be acknowledged. Terrence Hayes, in a piece titled "Journal, Day One," published in *Poetry Foundation*, reflects on a lecture he gave on voice and craft and offered his incisive view of Baraka's poetry as a notable example, averring, "In the lecture I brought in poems by poets who demonstrated a 'mastery' of craft in their first books, but inevitably moved beyond craft to something else. Amiri Baraka is an easy example. The poems in 1961's *Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note* show that he obviously knows (or knew) 'the rules'" (Hayes). Hayes digresses later and elaborates on Baraka's poetry five years later, focusing on the poem "Black Arts," to demonstrate the change Baraka undergoes in his craft but does not offer any form of condemnation of the poet's verse. Instead he tendered the following declarative: "Which is better depends on your tastes, I suppose" (Hayes).

Interestingly, Baraka's influences as a poet are grounded in the affinity he shares with his American literary forerunners. In a radio interview hosted by Farai Chideya, he was asked to shed light on the influences of the African griot tradition and the poetry that informs his work and he replied:

> I've always wanted to write pretty much like I speak. And I got that from people like Langston Hughes and William Carlos Williams, that you should try to get your own natural sound, your natural voice and rhythms. And the line breaks in the poems should be your breath phrases. Those things come from a poetic tradition that is American, yet as far as the Afro-American tradition, it certainly is similar to the old, the ancient rappers, you know. (Chideya)

Indeed the penchant for writing poetry the way he speaks is a quality that is synonymous with Baraka's poetry. In his book *Eulogies*, a collection of eulogies he wrote for famous artists, heroes/heroines, relatives, family and friends, Baraka included the poem "Brother Okot," which he penned for Okot p'Bitek, the Ugandan poet and author of revered book of African poetry "Song of Lawino." The poem is a riveting example of Baraka writing as the speaker's voice embodies the way he speaks. The poem reads thus:

…

I have heard
his songs
felt the earth
drum his
dance
his wide ness
& Sky self

Ocoli Singer
Ocoli Fighter

Brother Okot
now here w/ us
in the place

Where even the Sun
dies.

The significance of Baraka's literary impact and influences are fully understandable because he is committed to a literary destiny that is tied to an African diasporic and multiethnic heritage. Komozi Woodard attempts to explain this characteristic of Baraka's work when he contends,

> One thing that distinguished Amiri Baraka's cultural work was that in searching for answers he returned to the Black source that was routinely obscured by white domination. His research led him to examine a range of African American, Latin American, Caribbean and African vectors and traditions: thus, he examined the spiritual, musical, dance, sports, labor, literary and arts, intellectual and political aspects of Black life. ("Remembering")

I agree with Woodard because I find Baraka's interest in examining the aforementioned literary traditions as a deliberate attempt to leave a legacy for the younger generation of black writers in America. He is a writer who has never avoided the opportunity to take on the role of a custodian to the African American literary tradition.

In fact, when twentieth-century African-American literature is re-examined to discuss its principal writers, Amiri Baraka (Leroi Jones) will certainly merit mention as a groundbreaker for younger African-American writers and American writers from diverse ethnic groups because of his fearless rhetoric, pan-Africanist allegiances, and devotion to Black American oral resources. In a writing career that lasted almost five decades, his versatility has been rewarded with the publication of over a dozen books. On top of that, he has won numerous prestigious awards including the Guggenheim, American Book Award, National Endowment for the Arts, among other notable recognitions that placed him among the pantheon of America's literary giants. Widely recognized for his poetry, drama, essays, fiction and music criticism, Baraka built a following among writers, academics and critics from different generations. The poet Yusef Komunyakaa rates him so highly that he contends that, "If there is literary heir to Langston Hughes, it is Amiri Baraka" (33). Award-winning playwright August Wilson cites him as one of the major voices of the Black Arts Movement that paved the way for his own emergence as a playwright (Wilson).

In a speech on Black Theatre and Performance titled "The Ground on Which I Stand," Wilson took a reverential stance as he remembers fondly how his own writing was influenced by the Black playwrights of the 1960s, a group that includes Baraka:

> I stand myself and my art squarely on the self-defining ground of the slave quarters, and find the ground to be hallowed and made fertile by the blood and bones of the men and woman who can be described as warriors on the cultural battlefield that affirmed their self-worth. As there is no idea that cannot be contained by black life, these men and women found themselves to be sufficient and secure in their art and their instruction.
>
> It was this high ground of self-definition that the black

> playwrights of the ’60s marked out for themselves. Ron Milner, Ed Bullins, Philip Hayes Dean, Richard Wesley, Lonne Elder III, Sonia Sanchez, Barbara Ann Teer and Amiri Baraka were among those playwrights who were particularly vocal and where remain indebted to them for their brave and courageous forays into an area that is marked with land mines and the shadows of snipers—those who would reserve the territory of arts and letters and the American theatre as their own special province and point blacks toward the ball fields and the bandstands.

Wilson pays homage to a laudable group of men and women whose definitive role in playwriting helped in situating black life within the spatial distribution of American theatre. Furthermore, Wilson’s quotation places Baraka as a writer whose forays into the terrains of serious writing helped in situating and revitalizing black art in America.

Like Wilson, E. Ethelbert Miller recognizes Baraka’s imposing legacy in the academy as a major source of inspiration for younger African-American writers, observing:

> Baraka was my hero because his voice actually triggered the Black Arts Movement, creating the transformative awareness and consciousness which is necessary for African-African-American culture to survive…I think there is a direct link between Baraka and Langston in terms of true artists who write in every genre: autobiography, short stories, plays, poems. Baraka is one of the major writers who has literally affected a generation. (xvii)

Haki Madhubuti, on the other hand, postulates a sense of continuum and cultural responsibility in Baraka’s artistic commitment and states thus:

> Amiri Baraka is a master at manipulating blackmusic rhythms. His rhythms are black and original in part because often they are based on other principles than having stressed syllables come at predictable intervals. Rather, Amiri creates internal rhyme as well as rhythms by repeating stressed sounds at intervals

> that are dictated by his feel for black liferhythms and blackmusic. For example, in the beginning of "The Nation Is Like Ourselves," from *It's Nation Time*:
>
> > The nation is like ourselves, together
> >
> > seen in our various scenes, sets where ever we are
> >
> > whatever we are doing, is what the nation … (30)

Madhubuti's contention provides necessary insight into the transparency that is evidenced in Baraka's work. Like most African-American authors influenced by the emotional spirit of the 1960s and 70s literary renaissance in America, Baraka felt the urge to use his art to generate a national consciousness that inspired black Americans and other marginalized minorities to realize the viability of the arts as a vehicle that promotes social awareness. Put simply, his poetry mediated bonds across ethical and moral lines. Perhaps one can argue also that as a spokesperson for his people, Baraka fit the profile of the artist Kofi Awoonor describes when he intimates, "I'm aware not only of the intrinsic value of art, but also of art serving the function of social commentary … putting together the multiplicity of, not only intellectual, but also social experiences" (190). Given that Baraka is held in high regard by many of his peers from the black American literary tradition, it is admissible for one to conclude that his literary career, though marred by angry rhetoric against oppression suffered by black Americans from mainstream culture, seemed to have carved for him a symbolic role as a forerunner for many of the African-American poets and playwrights cultivating their talents in America's artistic landscape.

Aspects of His Aesthetics and Visionary Commitment

Perhaps it is essential to note also that Baraka's career experienced, at different points, a sort of metamorphosis that great writers are prone to undergo. Nevertheless, it is the candidness with which Baraka asserted his search for both a human and an African philosophical system that would vindicate his quintessential essence

as a serious writer. His proposition is very intriguing and is crucial to our understanding of the fundamental basis that undergirded the political and cultural beliefs that occupied his thoughts during the sixties and seventies. That America was still undergoing political transformation that influenced race relations is important to be noted if Baraka's intellectual and cultural beliefs must be understood. Both his associations with the BAM and the Nation of Islam helped in shaping and molding the individual that he became. However, it is his creative energy and penetrating insight on the black condition in America and the legacy of black arts that gave preeminence to his role as a literary heir to the great black authors whose shoes he inherited. Yusef Komunyakaa posits that "To date, Amiri Baraka is one of the first names that light on the tongue if one were to ask, Who is the rightful heir to the Langston Hughes Legacy? This is mainly due to his long allegiance to jazz and the blues through essays and poetry" (33). He links Baraka to the great poet Langston Hughes in manner that is both remarkable and politically recognizable. Hughes, for all his accomplishments as an author of vast literary genres, possessed the extraordinary resources that gave his intellectual productivity both relevance and candor. It is the same qualities that critics such as Komunyakaa see in Baraka.

For Amiri Baraka, the writer embodies preoccupations and ideals that might be fulfilled or not fulfilled during his/her lifetime. His work, especially his poetry, functioned under the aegis of cultural values in opposition to oppressive mainstream values in the sixties and seventies in America. Yet the logic of Baraka deviating from contentious issues that waded in historical and political terrains seemed to have formed the vortex of his worldview. In his essay "Words" he launches into a futuristic meditation as he situates his own adventures in writing, declaring, "The purpose of myself, has not yet been fulfilled. Perhaps it will never be" (178). Admirably, one ought to respect an artist for his sincerity, but Baraka's levity sometimes hides his seriousness. Here he is not only projecting into the future but is also asking questions indirectly. This aspect of his writing, like many critics have written, helps in facilitating the serious artist. Haki Madhubuti once averred that "Writers should be questioners of the real world and doers within the world" (21) and added "Question everything. And don't be satisfied with the quick surface answers" (21). It is this insistence on questioning the world that Baraka had embraced steadfastly as he probed the very culture and society he knew best.

Gwendolyn Brooks uses an anecdote to present this aspect of Baraka's poetry by way of a comparison with Langston Hughes:

> Langston Hughes … in many of his poems was able to put his keen ear to the latter Black ground, was able to hear the "militant" rumblings therein, was able to interpret correctly a portion of the latter significance:
>
> > I could tell you
> >
> > if I want to
> >
> > what makes me
> >
> > what I am
> >
> > But I really
> >
> > don't want to
> >
> > and you don't
> >
> > give a damn.
>
> Baraka, feeling much the same, could bring it all down into the succinct, no-nonsense incandescence of "SOS." (6)

Brooks' conclusions helped in explaining how Baraka reached his reader with the kind of passion and grit that made his messages accessible tersely. This, perhaps, is what Brooks also hints at as she states, "Then came Baraka, rejecting all lovely little villanelles and Sonnets—to Orpheus or anything else. Prettiness was out. Fight-fact was in. Baraka demanded black poems. Poems must be teeth, fists, daggers, guns, cop-wrestlers. Why? These would be cleansers! 'Clean out the world for virtue and love,' Baraka ordered" (7).

The idea of "cleaning out the world for virtue and love" was aimed at making available the cultural imperatives necessary for change. Racism and social injustice had been two forces that impeded the progress of minorities and race relations in America in the past. To help avert these social ills, Baraka saw the need to use poetry as a weapon for effecting change, in addition to the artist serving as a model to his community. The logic embedded in Brooks' assertion finds relevance several poems published by Baraka and especially in the poem "Black Art," where he declares

> Poems are bullshit unless they are
> teeth or trees or lemon piled
> on a step. Or black ladies dying
> of men leaving nickel hearts
> beating them down. Fuck poems
> and they are useful, wd they shoot
> come at you, love what you are,
> breathe like wrestlers, or shudder
> strangely after pissing… (*Reader* 219)

Here, the attempt to promote the role of the poet as an activist voice concerned with bringing change is visible. In this sense the poet is not merely relegated to the status of a wordsmith but rather is held in high regard to that position of one endowed with the wisdom to lead his community. But first, he must accept his status as a model to others, an idea espoused by James Stewart, who insists: "Our models must be consistent with a black style, our natural aesthetic styles, and our moral and spiritual styles. In doing so, we will merely be following the natural demands of our culture. These demands are suppressed in the larger (white) culture, but, nonetheless, are found in our music and in our spiritual and moral philosophy" (3). Indeed Stewart's underlying message had been the catalyst for Baraka's modus operandi, thus affirming his intimation concerning his obligation as a writer when he shares the following:

> My writing reflects my own growth and expansion, and at the same time the society in which I have existed throughout this longish confrontation. Whether it is politics, music, literature, or the origins of language, there is a historical and time/place/condition reference that will always try to explain exactly why I was saying both how and for what. (xiv)

Amiri Baraka's voluminous publications situate his visionary commitment within the purview of American and African diaspora discourse because of the aesthetic principles that inform his poetics, dramaturgy, and critical logic. Global literature of the African diaspora, especially African-American literature, is governed by the quest for

truth and the attempt to negotiate a future that recognizes the distinction between black identity in a racially divided society and culture that pretends to give cognizance to people irrespective of culture and race. In his writings, especially poetry, Baraka sought to claim the ideals and artistic forms necessary for the progress of black art in America. In his poetry conceptual forms and oral resources standout however interrelated or imbricated to each other. Therefore, when one reads the poet Haki Madhubuti's declaration that "Writers should be questioners of the real world and doers within the world. Question everything. And don't be satisfied with the quick surface answers" (21), there emerges a sense of urgency concerning the function of literary text and its peculiar role in negotiating a black destiny through creative writing predicated on historical, cultural, spiritual, and geographical expressions directly drawn from *African cosmology* and black art.

For Baraka, these ideas are inherent in the imaginative representations of his writings and intersect with intractable lines in American literary history. When he founded the Black Arts Movement he emerged as a major intellectual voice for the black community in America, considering that he was a poet, playwright, essayist, and scholar, who wrote zestful and angry writings that captured the emotional spirit of the 1960s and the 1970s. His formation of the artistic movement was particularly crucial because of the context of the movement and the political events of the era, such as the Civil Rights Movement, and the deaths of Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X. Amiri Baraka's voluminous poetry, plays and essays were practically statements aimed at overturning every notable contraction in American letters that disregarded the cultural and political significance of black art.

It seems to me that Baraka's daring works, especially his poetry, served as an urgent attempt to vilify the spirit of African-American consciousness in the Americas. While he was perceived as an angry voice, he clearly produced literary works empowered by both language and style that attempted to reach out to the black world and marginalized groups that shared in his belief that Western capitalism, imperialism and colonialism preoccupied the black mind and formed a coalition with political and cultural forces that slowed the progress of the black community and other marginalized groups. Before I go further in illuminating ideas pertinent to Baraka's worldview and artistic philosophy, it is fitting that we grasp his inspiration for writing

and how that inspiration functioned in his artistic expressions. In his preface to the *Amiri Baraka/LeRoi Jones Reader*, he notes, "My writing reflects my own growth and expansion, and at the same time the society in which I have existed throughout this longish confrontation. Whether it is politics, music, literature, or the origins of language, there is a historical and time/place/condition reference that will always try to explain exactly why I was saying both how and for what" (xiv). The candidness with which he asserts his search for both a human and an African philosophical system that would vindicate his quintessential essence as a writer is without a doubt perceivable in the above statement.

Brook's statement affirms Baraka's poetic genius and his full participation in the civil rights struggle for black Americans and other ethnic Americans. It is for this reason that conscious poetry readers regard Baraka very seriously and remember how productive his writings were in making memorable the historical moments that shaped and influenced the literature representation of the 1960s and 70s in America. Let me add also that undoubtedly the philosophical sweep of Baraka's prodigious imagination was widely admired by those who sought meaning from art that eschewed oppression and dared convention. Among these authors were the poet Don L. Lee (Haki Madhubuti), The Last Poets (Felipe Luciano, Oyewole, Nilija Obabi, Gylan Kain, David Nelson), Kalamu ya Salaam, August Wilson, E. Ethelbert Miller, among others.

Conclusion

Amiri Baraka may be gone but I sincerely hope his achievements as a writer in the past fifty one years plus will not be forgotten. This is important because history treats those whom it chooses fairly and Baraka undoubtedly belongs to the group of American authors whose works transformed lives and pushed generations to rethink the political, cultural, and philosophical perspectives that shaped American literature and culture. As a Black writer who saw the Civil Rights Movement and championed the course of the Black Arts Movement, he would be remembered in a myriad of ways by his critics. Nevertheless, if there was something about him and his corpus that could not be overlooked, it would be his unrelenting commitment to a Black destiny and American legacy in his writings. Undoubtedly, his corpus represents literature that evades every attempt to compromise the importance of black American art and other forms of the oral tradition. Indeed, he was a

creative force in America's literary landscape and will be remembered as a committed writer whose works speak to the importance of African-American literature as a cultural production with historical and social relevance.

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