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An Interview with Ammiel Alcalay

Q: How did you get to know Amiri Baraka and/or his work?

AA: I was a weird kid. I encountered *System of Dante's Hell*, *Tales*, and *Blues People* as a teenager, and I never stopped reading him. This would have been 1969, 1970, 1971, those years. I can't remember when I first actually saw him read or met him. I know I saw some plays in the 1970s and I believe I also heard him read somewhere in that period. But I was close to people who had been close to him: Gilbert Sorrentino, for example, who was a teacher of mine, and then a good friend. By hearing Gil talk about "Roi," I felt like I knew him before I got to know him, it felt legendary! I certainly got a feeling for his unparalleled sense of humor, which I got to know first-hand later.

I was out of the country for about 8 years in the late 70s and 80s but when I got back I was an adjunct teacher at Rutgers University, just at a time when Amiri was teaching there and, apparently, having some problems. I met him then and I also remember posting a little sign on the bulletin board that I can't imagine won me any popularity contests there—I wrote something like: "REMEMBER THIS: Amiri Baraka has forgotten more about poetry than most of the faculty here ever knew!" He used to play John Coltrane and Sun Ra in the hallways and I think that somehow upset the order of western civilization or something.

I then got to see him more, at readings, some visits to his house, and it was always a thrill and a pleasure. When he introduced me to his wife Amina, he said: "This is the brother that the Zionists are giving so much trouble to." Wow, that was really an honorable way to be introduced, I thought. I had the honor to introduce him on several public occasions, once at a huge festival celebrating the Black Arts Movement at Georgetown University, for his keynote lecture, and then again at the annual Olson Lecture in Gloucester, not that long before he died.

He was incredibly supportive of our work in *Lost & Found*, the publishing project that I am the founder and General Editor of. We did a lot of work on Ed Dorn and Amiri was very close to Ed and retained enormous respect for him and his work. One of our earliest projects was a selection of letters between him and Dorn, from the late 1950s to 1965, and that eventually became a book. He was very happy about that and made time for us. As always, in retrospect, one always wishes there had been more time, more occasions, but I feel very lucky to have gotten to know him at all.

Q: Would you cite him as one of the inspirations to write poetry?

AA: Absolutely, and I think that's still true. In Amiri's case, though, it wasn't just "writing poetry." It was more like Charles Olson in the sense that the intention of poetry was much wider, it had to do with finding things out, with activating knowledge, with being part of an ongoing nexus of activities. But as far as poetry goes, strictly speaking, I've been thinking about some of his poetry more and more recently. In the 1980s Ed Dorn wrote a series of poems called *Abhorrences* that a lot of people were horrified by: they were short, caustic commentaries on so-called public life. And they were a great influence on Amiri, who embarked on a series he called *Lo Coup* (definitely not Haiku) poems. Well, for the last few years, I've been writing such a series, in homage to Dorn, called *Imperial Abhorrences (& Other Abominations)*, so I've been thinking about and reading Amiri's poems.

He also had an extraordinary way of shifting registers, even within a sentence. There's a piece of his called "Something in the way of things" that I read at his memorial at the Poetry Project at St Mark's Church, and it moves from the most condensed vernacular to an almost Elizabethan elegance in a flash. I think he got a lot of that from listening to music, from concentrating on how these great geniuses, players of so-called Jazz, were able to transform the most banal tunes into great works of art. He talked about first doing a gig with Max Roach and a few other musicians and he showed up, you know, with a folder of poems, and notebooks, and they looked at him and said: "What's that?" And Amiri said, "My poems." They just laughed and said, "Nope, you have to play like us, no sheet music." So there was incredible agility and variation in his tone, I love that.

Q: What turning point(s) or phase(s) in his career strike you as the most important? Why?

AA: Ah, the proverbial $64,000 question. Of course, Amiri was like a whirling dervish in that sense, here one day and someplace very different the next. But there was a real logic to it, and he carried the load as he went from one station to another on the journey. In many ways, I think he exposed himself, maybe not all parts of himself, but many public parts of himself, in order that other people might feel permission to try something different. I think that's a big problem in how people think about him now: they have their favorite Baraka but not the whole person.

Certainly a big turn came on his trip to Cuba, something that made him fundamentally question a lot of the assumptions he had and a lot of what he was doing. There were many people, for instance in the Black Panther Party, who were deeply against his Black nationalist phase, and thought it very damaging, and ill-informed. At the same time, once he went back to Newark, he really dug his heels in, and became a real institution in and for the city. The result of that, for sure, is the fact that his son Ras is now Mayor of Newark, something that Amiri, unfortunately, didn't get to see before he passed on, even though I think he knew, in his heart of hearts, that Ras would win!

To me, all the phases are important: we have to remember that, early on, in editing *Yugen* with his then wife Hettie Jones, they really consolidated all the disparate, non-academic poets across the country, something no one before them had been able to accomplish. The publication of *Yugen* really makes possible Donald Allen's landmark anthology, *The New American Poetry*. I've found some of his less read, less popular periods—some of the more ideologically driven political work—incredibly helpful as a way to imagine ourselves out of various assumptions. Anything he wrote on music is of enormous value. His eulogies are legendary. I saw him give the eulogy for Larry Neal, it was absolutely breathtaking.

Q: Do you have any personal favorites among Baraka's work? Could you talk about one? Or any that you felt has grown in significance in time for you?

AA: That's a tough one—there are so many. His earliest story, "Suppose Sorrow Was a Time Machine," is something I reread all the time. It's an absolute masterpiece, and still haunting. I teach *Blues People* whenever I have the opportunity, and I teach it as part of a

group of texts that include things like Muriel Rukeyser's *Willard Gibbs*, Olson's *Call Me Ishmael*, Ed Dorn's *The Shoshoneans*, *The Family* by Ed Sanders, David Henderson's biography of Jimi Hendrix, and a number of others—these are what I call books of poetic knowledge, areas in which poets ventured across so-called "disciplines," particularly during the Cold War and aftermath, in order to explore something and treat it very differently than a standard academic or mainstream approach might. Interestingly, Baraka writes at the beginning of *Blues People* that it is a "theoretical" work. There is a lot involved in teaching students weaned on structuralism, post-structuralism, and every other imaginable kind of theory, to make them understand that, yes, actually, *Blues People* is ALSO a theoretical text. I love *Tales of the Out and Gone*, later fiction, especially some of the 9/11 related pieces. The piece I mentioned earlier, "Something in the way of things," is a text I have very deeply imprinted and ingrained in my head and heart.

Q: Could you comment on the politics-poetics relationship in the context of Baraka's work, which partially forms the way Baraka's work is received? Do you find that discussion fruitful?

AA: This is one of those US red herrings—there are those who like Baraka more before he became so-called "political" and those who don't like him at all before he became so-called "political." The most political poems published in the US may be those *New Yorker* poems about clams on Long Island, because they appear next to very expensive ads for luxury items, and pay more than a dollar-a-word. I think they actually pay by the column inch. But I guess they probably don't publish as many of those now since they can claim to be more *au courant*. But the ads remain, that is the context of those poems, no matter what the poems "say."

So unfortunately, the discussion is generally NOT fruitful, though it should be. But in order for it to be fruitful, most "educated" United Statesians, and I stress educated, would need to de-educate themselves of many assumptions about what politics consists of. Under the ideological reign of terror prevalent in the US, politics means "those things I don't agree with." This is the liberal middle ground of consensus through which sanctions got imposed on Iraq, killing hundreds of thousands of people. What, I ask, is the real difference between Heidegger maintaining a university post and being a member of the party during National Socialism and liberal American academics

voting for Clinton and his sanctions on Iraq? That things took place further away? So I think a fruitful discussion would have to start out with some common terms as to what is meant by the "political."

To get back to Baraka, this is very unfortunate because some of his most strident works are great instruments by which fruitful discussions might be had, but few people are willing to get past the surface of things, the assumptions behind those surfaces, and examine what intellectual work might look like from very different perspectives. The great example of this is the general reaction to his poem "Somebody Blew Up America." I find it absolutely astonishing that more people got angry about a poem, a poem, and not, let's say, a government order, a thing that actually has policy repercussions, that can bomb a country, impose sanctions, kill people, torture them, or put them in prison.

So there was more anger over the poem than over things that actually happened on 9/11 and how those things were reported: for example, was it possible for a single plane to topple a skyscraper like that? Many engineers say it wasn't. Why were all the remains of the buildings hauled off and not forensically examined? Why were claims made that fingerprints were found in areas where the temperature of the heat was high enough to vaporize aluminum and steel? Why were there gaps in the timeline of the air controllers, and a thousand other things that an informed public should have been outraged over, or at least questioned? Well, instead, people got angry about a poem.

Q: To what extent was Baraka internationally concerned with politics?

AA: I think Amiri got to a point where he was able to look to certain political situations, and writers and thinkers involved in or emerging from them, as a kind of litmus test on how to proceed from where he was. In other words, he was FROM HERE, but, of course, via Africa. So Newark, New Ark, a place that was home but never home and always home. A contradiction right off the bat. Pastoral poems out the window, not about flowers and clams like those silly old but very political *New Yorker* poems, but about what he saw out the window, in Newark: someone nodding out, a drug deal, a street walker, broken windows.

Toni Cade Bambara has this great thing where she writes: "And I understand that the world is big, that the actual and potential audience

for Black writings is wide. People in Cuba, Iran, Vietnam, Brazil, the Caribbean, New Hebrides, the Continent, all over are interested in knowing how we in the belly of the beast are faring, what we are doing, how we see things." This is a very important concept, and I think one that Amiri was acutely aware of. In other words: he drew a lot from other parts of the world, from other struggles, but he also understood that he was able to speak from, report from, a very unique position, one that could help inform the world as to things also of importance to them.

Q: Could you name poets/writers/thinkers whom you would align Amiri Baraka with? It could be across time & geography…

AA: I once did a useful thought experiment in a class in which we looked at work by writers who were all born in 1934, taking into account an interesting developmental timeline that Robert Duncan had once set up (i.e. crucial ages, nursing, standing, walking, talking etc.). So the 1934 generation would be generally walking and starting to talk by the time the Spanish Civil War starts. These include, just as the tip of the iceberg: Amiri, Ted Berrigan, Ray Bremser. Diane di Prima, Henry Dumas, George Economou, Anselm Hollo, Hettie Jones, Joanne Kyger, Audre Lorde, A.B. Spellman, and John Wieners. What was interesting about this was that, writers who at first glance might seem to have little or nothing to do with each other, might still, at some level, be addressing similar concerns.

In any case, although Amiri was a deep student of W.E.B. DuBois, and there is much to learn by looking at them in relation to each other, I think it's important to look at him in relation to Charles Olson and Ed Dorn, two people that remained very important for him. There is an extraordinary poem in *The Maximus Poems* about Amiri, whose father, like Olson's, also worked for the postal service, and it was Amiri who first published *Projective Verse* as a stand-alone pamphlet. The relationship to Dorn was more as a friend and contemporary but also someone whom Amiri trusted implicitly and through whom ideas were tested, even when they were out of touch.

And then I would say that Amiri's insight into the intellectual stance of musicians, into the positions that their music embodied, would provide an extraordinary source of cross-pollination. So that would mean looking deeply into the worlds and works of Thelonius

Monk, Sun Ra, Ornette Coleman, Archie Shepp, Albert Ayler, Cecil Taylor, and so many others, and trying to figure out how to translate their poetics into textual form.

Q: What is missing generally or understood properly in recent Baraka scholarship?

AA: In a piece that I wrote about Amiri, I quoted the great British scholar of the Indigenous Americas, Gordon Brotherston, someone whom Ed Dorn worked with closely. Brotherston wrote that "the prime function of classical texts is to construct political space and anchor historical continuity." This is an incredibly useful statement, and it would be hard to find a more classical US writer than Amiri—to begin with, he wrote in all the traditional genres: poetry, drama, and prose. And then he wrote scholarship, polemics, autobiography. One can hardly think of anyone else who did that, and had such an impact in each area. I don't think, for instance, that even such a basic concept as this is taken into account when looking at his work.

For quite a number of years, and more so as he got older, Amiri kept bringing up the value of writers he had been associated with earlier, insisting that without keeping them alive in some way, they too would get "disappeared." I'm afraid that there is some such disappearance underway with Amiri now, under the aegis of 'having gotten past all that,' the incredible "presentist" tyranny that subjugates the past to some supposed notion of progress. Unless I've missed something, this publication in Turkey would be the first such gesture, a special issue of a journal, since Amiri's passing, and it doesn't surprise me. So I think, just to begin with, that it's very important to keep exploring his archives: there is a tremendous amount of work that still needs to be published, correspondence, plays, poems, essays. We've just offered, through *Lost & Found*, a modest research stipend for a student at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, to do archival work on Amiri. I truly hope something comes of it.

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