

JAST, 2019; 51:23-28

Submitted: 14.02.2019

Accepted: 14.02.2019

ORCID# 0000-0001-8913-5910

For Amiri Baraka¹

Pierre Joris

The literary, cultural, political importance of Amiri Baraka's life and work is there for all to see. I would like to briefly say why his work has been important for my own vision of the world. Indeed, it was his writing and example that helped set me straight about America when I started seriously reading Leroi Jones/ Amiri Baraka after getting to the U.S.A. in 1967—at exactly the date, I was to find out later, when he was jailed in Newark.

Before that, growing up in Europe after WWII Europe, my experience of African-American culture was a more or less unthought-through romantic love-affair with an attractive, fascinating, strange, sexy and also at times dangerous other. At 12, on holiday in Belgium, away from perfectly white Luxembourg, my parents took me to a Nat King Cole concert and a year later to a Louis and Ella concert; at 15, I got mother to drive me into France to catch Ray Charles in Metz. On AFN radio I listened to Fats Domino, the Platters, Chubby Checker, etc. I bought Bessie Smith records. I fell in love with jazz and my first published piece of writing in the high school catholic students' paper was a potted bio of Charlie Parker. In Paris as a medical student in 1965 I started to read *Invisible Man* and the poetry of Hughes and Bob Kaufman. I got dissed at my first poetry reading there—for a bad poem in honor of Langston Hughes—by Ted Joans, but saved by Jimmy Baldwin who told Joans to stop; I drove with friends to Orly airport to welcome various free jazz musicians come to play at the Huchette clubs; I played pinball with Memphis Slim; I learned pages of dialogue from Baldwin's *Another Country* by heart, etc...

I was, in one word, a well-meaning cultural tourist getting

his vicarious kicks from the luxury of Euro-bourgeois distance and safety. As Baraka says in “Political Poem”: “Luxury then is a way of / being ignorant, comfortably / An approach to the open market / of least information. Where theories / can thrive, under heavy tarpaulins / without being cracked by ideas.”

Well, coming to America cracked much of this, by ripping off the tarpaulin, by foreshortening the distance, and my relationship to African-American culture got thrown off-kilter. I was no longer in Kansas, I mean Paris. Now all of those vicarious experiences moved out of the realm of just art, aesthetics, entertainment and fascinating other-ness, moved beyond a kid’s mimetic desire to be as hip and cool as his jazz heroes, all of this mess got anchored and reframed and given an actual dimension in the real world, in an actual real cultural and political context—and studying Baraka’s work, from the poetry to the essays to the plays and on taught me how to see that world, taught me how to reframe my sense of what I had already experienced through a glass pinkishly European and opened new vistas I did not know existed. I owe him for all of that.

This was possible, I now realize, because Amiri’s work was deeply connected to the other work from the White World that deeply engaged me, namely the Euro-American avant-garde tradition. I came to his work at the same time as I came to the work of the major American avant-garde poets of that time, such as the Beats (the connection to them is obvious and well-documented), or the great modernists like WCW (a NJ poet whose decision to write up the minute particulars of his town of Paterson is not that far, even if very different—and for good reasons—from AB’s move to and concentration on Newark), or, closer to my generation, the Black Mountain poets (Olson’s political rants at Gloucester, another New Ark gone wrong) or Edward Dorn (to whom *The Dead Lecturer* is dedicated—check out AB’s lecture *Ed Dorn & the Western World*). It is, to put it too briefly, his guidance through the complex reality of that multi-dimensional, even if often partitioned, yet totally enmeshed America that allowed me to overcome the romanticism of my early love affair with Black America.

When Jerome Rothenberg and I published our *Poems for the Millennium* anthology (a book, for which Amiri gave us the lovely blurb “From real Soup to real Nuts”) we wrote a commentary for the Baraka section: It was Baraka’s genius to grasp the ferocity (theatrical,

poetic) of Artaud's "theater of cruelty" & to redirect it—in the context of his own time—into a "revolutionary" poetry & theater, of which [Baraka] wrote: "This is a theater of assault. The play that will split the heavens for us will be called THE DESTRUCTION OF AMERICA. The heroes will be Crazy Horse, Denmark Vesey, Patrice Lumumba, and not history, not memory, not sad sentimental groping for a warmth in our despair; these will be new men, new heroes, and their enemies most of you who are reading this." (525-526)

And at the close of the commentary:

As a declaration of [Baraka's] sources & directions, his late ongoing poem *Why's/Wise*—"about African American (American) History"—is described by him as "in the tradition of the Griots [African Singer-Poet-Historians] but also like Melvin Tolson's *Liberia*, William Carlos Williams's *Paterson*, Charles Olson's *Maximus* in that it tries to tell the history/life like an ongoing-off-coming Tale." (526)

But let me give Amiri the last word. In his lecture on Ed Dorn, he analyses and frames Dorn's quest in terms that apply to him too:

Is there a genuine alignment of progressive concerns? Is there an attention so rigorous that it makes us common workers for some as yet unclearly stated alternative to all this. The pettiness of the evil around us and in us to whatever degree we cannot fend it off, is not actually petty at all. If it is petty we are safe in our germ free sanitized intellectual niches of not so quiet self-regard. We are safe because we will not question, we will not work to actually change what might be simple annoyance or unjust criticism, or oppression or torture or death.

What is this Place? And what has it made us? Where does it come from? We are shaped by what it has made us as we shape what it is ourselves. It was Sekou Touré saying the same thing essentially as Olson. I was moving from one locus to another but prepared as much by what I had gleaned as by what I was entering. (xix)²

That last line, and its double movement, forward, avanti!, into the new & unexplored while *eingedenk*, with awareness of, past experience ready for use, resonates very deeply with my own sense of poetics, what I have for some years now called a Nomad Poetics. Baraka's next sentence states:

It was Wittgenstein who taught me Ethics and Aesthetics are one.

I would like to say:

It was Baraka who taught me Ethics and Aesthetics are the same.

Thank you, Amiri, for all the gifts of the spirit.

Notes

¹ The text is the revised version of the talk given at the Amiri Baraka celebration at the Brooklyn Pratt Institute, Wednesday 12 February 2014, organized by Tracie Morris and Maria Damon. Copyright © by Pierre Joris.

² The page reference is to the reprint edition of the text, which appears as Preface in *Amiri Baraka and Edward Dorn: The Collected Letters* (guest editor's note).

Works Cited

Baraka, Amiri. *The Dead Lecturer*. Grove P, 1964.

---. *Ed Dorn and the Western World*, Skanky Possum and Effing P, 2009.
Reprinted in *Amiri Baraka and Edward Dorn: The Collected Letters*, edited by Claudia Moreno Pisano, U of New Mexico P, 2014, pp. xiii-xxiv.

Rothenberg, Jerome, and Pierre Joris, editors. *Poems for the Millenium, vol 2*. The University of California Book of Modern and Postmodern Poetry, U of California P, 1998.