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Introduction

I got to know Amiri Baraka's work as LeRoi Jones through a poetics essay I read in an undergraduate poetry class, where my professor Dr. Barış Gümüşbaş (former editor of *JAST*) introduced the Donald Allen collection, the now classic, *New American Poetry* anthology. Therefore, my initiation was through avant-garde poetry, which constitutes just one strain in the greater context of Baraka's work—an incomplete one, if the reader just stays with it. It was not until the paths I took in my PhD research that I came back to the poetics of New American poetry, but this time digging deeper into the context of the Jones/Baraka oeuvre, especially his music history and criticism. The essay I read, as an undergraduate, was "How You Sound??" which later dawned on me as crystal clear about the way that the poetics of New American Poetry could speak to African American vernacular or musical idiom. Charles Olson's epigram "from the head by way of the ear to the syllable, from the heart by way of the breath to the line" can very well be translated into bebop, free jazz, and actually all forms of jazz—an idiosyncratic syntax and rhythm that emerge from the head and heart of its interlocutor. The poem is the score on the page to be performed on the stage.

Baraka invested a great deal of his effort in historicizing and theorizing African American musical expression. Although the blues continuum, the roots and the fruits, is recognized today as world heritage, let alone American classic, in the late 1950s and early 1960s the music was new, "out"; and Baraka (then LeRoi Jones) was among its first translators. In these first examples of music criticism, there were lessons to be taken. The first is, music is a great analogy for artistic life, daily life and way of thinking and feeling in the African American context. Blues music was created by "blues people" under specific historical and geographical circumstances. And once out there as the African American expression, music (blues, jazz, R&B, funk, rap, hip hop) went on to create the lives of its people. On the power of music that animates the inner world of a people, Baraka comments, "Music makes an image … By image, I mean that music … summons and describes where its energies were gotten" ("Changing Same" 185-186). For Baraka, Black music is

not *out there* as a model or inspiration but *in here*, carrying breath and memory in its substance. It is a place of being, a mental-spiritual-physical *soundscape*. Baraka says, "But dig, not only is it a place where Black People live, it is a place, in the spiritual precincts of its emotional telling, where Black People move in almost absolute openness and strength" ("Changing Same" 186-187). Baraka reveals Black music as a language, an emotional world and a way of being and knowing and speaking and walking that walk and talkin that talk…

Not having the fortune to meet him in person, I am hooked on to the recordings available on the Internet to make up for the immediacy of his voice and physical presence through performances, interviews and lectures. One of those lectures I would like to bring up is "Charles Olson and Sun Ra: A Note on Being Out," recorded on the occasion of Charles Olson Memorial Lecture, held at the Gloucester Writers Center in October 2013.[1] In 1960s slang, the expression of being "out" meant to be awesome and far ahead than anyone else, which seems to have occupied Baraka both in the title of his latest short story collection mentioned above and this particular lecture. Baraka begins by saying, "If you cannot make the connection [between Olson and Ra] you cannot understand the topology of that time." He presents their life stories from the lens of their preferences—or better, their "preferring not to." Both were dropouts from the academy, from institutions and stable professional positions. Both planted mythical personae into the present world: Maximus and Sun Ra, to "put the hinges back on the door, [2] so that we can go back and forth in a living history of space as well as time to begin to know ourselves and the place we are" (Baraka). Sun Ra dropped out to see and speak about the problems of the planet Earth from the vantage point of outer space; Olson dropped out to speak from an ancient philosopher's persona moved by his passion to detach himself from American imperialism. So this, for Baraka, is the "out"telligence[3] of these two figures that defined the "topology of that time" of which he was/is a living product. One might say, he is out, too.

Another text of interest is *The Essence of Reparations*, very "unpoetic" in subject matter, but essential to understand his continued activism. He lays his case for reparations and proposes a program with the same spirit in which he proposed the Kawaida Towers Project in 1971. [4] As a patriot, I am almost compelled to say, Baraka pushes for better days in his country:

> Reparations are a form of justice in the philosophical

> sphere. They are, in essence, a revolutionary democratic thrust that must force the yet unfinished United States democratic revolution, viz. the Civil War, and the sharp social and political upsurges of the decades of the twentieth century, including the most recent Civil Rights, Black Liberation, and anti-imperialist and anti-war movements, closer to completion. (*Essence* 22)

This issue lies at the core of his poetic and political thrust. In my mind, the image that he crafted with the life that he led is composed of these inseparable creative and political strains that speak beyond the boundaries of the U.S.

However, there is another image attributed to him, which is more readily available and consists of labels only: anti-Semitic, anti-white, misogynist, homophobic, racist, etc. His nuanced and historical-minded critique almost always disappears in the cracks of blunt and shallow -isms. With his unapologetic and factual tone he is very anachronistic at this time of political correctness and identity politics. Even the mention of his name in the academia is enough to raise controversy. I, for one, received a hostile e-mail shortly after launching the CFP for this issue. There is not much more to be said of this highly generalizing attitude so let me quote another poet, Claudia Rankine commenting on the vital nuances that characterize Baraka's thinking: "Baraka's poems criticized the black bourgeoisie, Nixon, 'the owner Jews,' the 'superafrikan Mobutu,' 'boss nigger,' Kissinger, 'Tom Ass Clarence,' 'Spike Lie' and on and on—basically everyone in our global community whose motives and actions he questioned." The criterion is politics as it throws daggers and javelins to the abuser, rather than a vulgar simplification of politics reduced to skin color. Rankine continues, "His struggle to form a black poetics that could marry his activism, politics, history, culture and imagination represented his struggle to exist." The world as it is gets into the poet's value system and goes out defined; awakening the people about the state of affairs and calling for change. Poet and choreographer Harmony Holiday, who works historically and creatively with audio-visual archives, comments,

> It's nauseating the way we take Baraka's immense and untamable body of work, and attempt to divide it neatly, into personal and political, as though one cannot write about the world critically in an intimate and tender way that transcends those categories and proves the extent

> to which one can be a citizen of himself in a manner that considers the nation a part of that selfhood and criticizes and orients his country and fellow countrymen accordingly.

I am aware that Amiri Baraka's artistic and political significance is yet to be recognized by a larger community than it is today. The valid question for me is, "what is his legacy?" Is it the number of labels and an attributed blind anger; or is it the poet's demand for historical context, clinging to facts with a journalist's passion, and his attention to the spontaneity of speech/music/breath—and never falling short of punch(ing)lines all this while. The rest seems to be false questions and false discussions that just simplify and miss the gist.

The scholar or student in American Studies in Turkey, or elsewhere, who is sympathetic towards the topic, would find in this issue a number of scholarly and personal essays that reflect insights on Baraka's work and personality. Dike Okoro provides a necessary chronological introduction for the uninitiated. Pierre Joris explains the role of Baraka's work for his poetics, commenting on his own digging into what began as a romantic fascination with Black music. M. G. Stephens reflects on the significance of the understudied classic text *Blues People*, as he remembers his own coming of age in the Village of the 1960s. If Amiri Baraka and food studies sound too distant and irreconcilable, Psyche Forson-Williams' essay proves to the contrary. Sultan Komut Bakınç calls the readers to reconsider Clay and Lula outside of stereotypes while Kate Siklosi registers the geo-social aesthetics/ethics of "nation time" and "terribleness" as Baraka invented New Ark. I address the oral quality in Baraka's poetry as epitomized in *Funk Lore* and *Real Song*. Finally, you can read the insightful perspective of Ammiel Alcalay who kindly responded to my somewhat proverbial questions, sent via electronic mail. The fact that the contributors have their own creative ways of writing, translating and teaching also tells me that Amiri Baraka's politics, aesthetics and personality is not just subject to conventional academic scholarship confined to print but resonates with diverse poetic practices. I am grateful to all those who contributed, gave me ideas, helped me spread the word for the issue (because sometimes a CFP does not reach everywhere) and reviewed manuscripts in their busiest time. I also thank my editor and editor-in-chief for making this issue available.

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Notes

[1] The video is uploaded with another title, as in the Works Cited.

[2] One section in Charles Olson's *Proprioception*, published by then-LeRoi Jones, was entitled "the hinges of civilization to be put back on the door" [sic].

[3] The word play belongs to Baraka—*in*telligence and being *out*.

[4] See Sullivan.

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