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# It's Nation Time: The Demonic Poethic of Amiri Baraka's New Ark

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**Abstract**

This article examines the work of Amiri Baraka during the 1960s and 70s using a fused geographic and poetic lens that is inflected by Katherine McKittrick's (via Sylvia Wynter) concept of "demonic ground." In works such as *It's Nation Time* (1970) and *In Our Terribleness* (1970), Baraka articulates an imagined, communal, demonic black urban nation and mirrors this vision back to his community so they may uprise from the deliberate invisibility and geographic dispossession at the hands of the white establishment. Through its imperative balance of poetic action with transformative activism beyond the page in post-rebellion New Ark, Baraka's demonic poethic demonstrates how space is inherently alterable, and how uneven geographies may be contested and transformed in art and in social practice.

**Keywords**

Amiri Baraka, poetry, poetics, geography, postwar, social transformation

## Ulus Zamanı: Amiri Baraka'nın New Ark'ı ve Şeytani Po-etik-a

**Öz**

Bu makale Katherine McKittrick'in (Sylvia Wynter'dan etkilenerek) geliştirdiği "demonik/şeytani zemin" kavramıyla kaynaştırılan coğrafya-şiir merceğinden Amiri Baraka'nın 1960'lar

ve 70'lerde ürettiği eserleri incelemektedir. *It's Nation Time* (1970) ve *In Our Terribleness* (1970) gibi eserlerde Baraka, ulus bilinci olan demonik siyahi bir topluluk ve kent (New Ark) kurgular ve bu vizyonunu kendi toplumuna yansıtarak onları beyaz sistemin mahkum ettiği görünmezlikten ve mülksüzlükten çıkarmayı amaçlar. İsyan sonrası New Ark'ta, şiirsel eylem ve politik aktivizm arasında kurduğu yaşamsal dengeyle Baraka'nın demonik poetikası ve etik anlayışı (po-etik-a), mekanın doğası gereği dönüşüme ne kadar müsait olduğunu gösterir. Sorunlu coğrafyaların sanatta ve sosyal pratikte tartışılabileceğini ve dönüştürülebileceğini de gözler önüne serer.

**Anahtar Kelimeler**

Amiri Baraka, şiir, poetika, coğrafya, savaş sonrası, sosyal dönüşüm

Land
will change
hand
s

—Amiri Baraka "Whas Gon Happen" (*Selected Poetry* 160)

For what is liberty but the unhampered translation of will into act?

—Dante Alighieri (107)

For many postwar poets of the 1950s and 1960s, the page provided a "field" for experimentations with place, for locating community, and for developing a resistant aesthetic practice against the spatial controls put on them by the State. One of those poets was Amiri Baraka, (formerly LeRoi Jones). In the late 1950s and early 1960s, while the young Baraka was cutting his teeth as a poet, he was influenced by the Black Mountain school of poets, including Charles Olson, Robert Creeley, and Robert Duncan. Specifically, he began practicing their

poetic methodology of "open-field" poetics or "projective verse." In this poetic methodology, the page is considered a dialogic "field," a site of convergence wherein various larger discursive fields—history, politics, culture, geography—interact and produce new networks of meaning and associations through their often-paratactic frictions. Each element of the poem is thus conceived as a "participant" in this larger poetic assemblage where no one thing is privileged over another, but rather circulate within the poem with equal force in an "open" politics of communion, exchange, and responsivity. In his autobiography, Baraka notes that "Projective Verse" "was for many of us the manifesto of a new poetry" (253). But more than that, for the young Baraka, this poetic represented a radical new way of articulating "How You Sound," the particularities of black experience in space.[1] As Baraka writes in an early essay, "Environment … becomes total, i.e., social, cultural, and physical, and not merely scenery. Thought is landscape, in the way the poet Charles Olson has used the word: what one can see from where one is standing" ("Introduction," *The Moderns* xii). [2]

In his later transitional work into his Black Nationalist phase, however, Baraka's work manifests both extensions and challenges to the Black Mountain conception of open field poetics. While Baraka shared the Black Mountain ideas of space and place as a field of interactive particulars with bodily experience, he nonetheless grew increasingly distant from what he conceived to be the empty politics of this poetic. He was initially attracted to the political form of open field poetics as a form of cultural rebellion against middle class bourgeois American values; however, this revolt, he would discover, was rooted in white privileged ideologies and did not reflect, for Baraka, the growing needs of black urban American space and experience. It became increasingly clear to Baraka that poetry without direct political action was no longer feasible.

Baraka thus continued to agree with the Black Mountainers on the political, open form of poetry; however, after the assassination of Malcolm X in 1965, and after witnessing the transformative uprising of the Cuban Revolution, he viewed the politic of their poetics as too idealistic and immaterial. As Kimberly W. Benston writes, "Baraka found that, while his peers in the avant-garde were content to be 'neutral' witnesses to cultural fragmentation, he was impelled as a black poet to be a chronicler of exile and an annunciator of nationhood" ("Introduction" 13). One had to act, he discovered, not just within the

space of the page, but beyond, by using one's art to actually transform the place of one's experience in the world. As a result, he left the politics of his Black Mountain peers aside while still maintaining the open field form and extending it to pursue the radical *geographic* project of black nationalism. I emphasize "geographic" because a spatial poetic analysis of Baraka's work is long overdue. Most of the existing critical work on Baraka's poetry deals with his cultural nationalism and jazz aesthetics; however, as James A. Tyner argues, "Geographers have paid scant attention to the political geographies of black radical intellectuals and, specifically, the Black Power movement. And yet a contestation over space was prominent in the varied approaches to the black freedom struggle" ("Urban" 229). [3] In an effort to mend this lack in literary and geographic scholarship, my discussion here inflects Baraka's poetry and poetics with what human geographer and critic Katherine McKittrick (via Sylvia Wynter) calls the *demonic ground*—those fugitive geographies and ways of knowing that lie outside colonial schemes and epistemologies. [4] This concept's importance to this discussion is twofold: first, it places Baraka's poetic activism in the geographic context of the colonial project that profits from dispossessing black peoples of space; second, it usefully demonstrates how in the face of such dispossession, a communal, active, lived poetics can not only "say" space, but can *create* it.

In her groundbreaking critical text *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (2006), McKittrick argues that black geographies have largely been rendered invisible by traditional geographical discourses, which are built on capitalist systems of value and metanarratives of dispossession that "*require* black displacement, black placenessness, black labor, and a black population that submissively stays 'in place'" (9; original emphasis). To fix racialized bodies "in place," dominant geographic metanarratives such as the transatlantic slave trade, settler colonialism, and the slave plantation, as well as the continuing colonial project of the present, create spatial schemas that "naturalize both identity and place, repetitively spatializing where nondominant groups 'naturally' belong" (McKittrick xv). While McKittrick argues that "existing cartographic rules unjustly organize human hierarchies in place and reify uneven geographies in familiar, seemingly natural ways" (x), she also suggests that such rules are not entrenched, but are alterable and can be paralleled with alternative geographic schemas.

As a means of "rethink[ing] the complex linkages between history, blackness, race, and place" (McKittrick 143) the demonic mode emphasizes spatial contestation and occupation by means of "paralleling" existing schemas. "Geographies of the everyday," (McKittrick 12) such as "[o]wnership of the body, individual and community voices, bus seats, women, 'Africa,' feminisms, history, homes, record labels, money, cars" (McKittrick 3) can be reimagined through lived reclamations of these signifiers from narratives of (dis) possession and limitation put on black women's lives, in particular. By recontouring these classifications of erasure with subjective, lived geographies of place, McKittrick suggests, "more humanly workable geographies can be and are imagined" (xii). McKittrick's work unveils the subversive power of the imagination, and of untold stories, to conjure alternative conceptions of space, place, and movement beyond traditional material geographies. In this way, her work provides a framework for shedding critical light on the ways in which racialized people develop resistant strategies of constructing place—both in their art, and in their everyday lives.

McKittrick's understanding of geography and of place therein exceeds the obvious signifiers of cities and neighborhoods to consider the ways in which one's sense of location results from an ensemble of multiple factors—social, political, cultural. Since the open field poetic also considers space as a field of dynamic and interactive elements that together create place, the demonic ground serves as a critical tool with which to narrate Baraka's significant challenges to and extensions of the field poetic throughout his work. Whereas many critics see the open field poetic as primarily an aesthetic methodology, I wish to depart from this trend here by situating Baraka's use of the field in his work as a demonic *poethic* practice, one that inextricably links aesthetics with social action on the ground of reality. Here I borrow the term "poethic" from Joan Retallack to describe a combined poetic and ethical practice of bringing together aesthetic experimentation and sociopolitical engagement. [5] The open field poethic of works such as Baraka's *It's Nation Time* (1970) and *In Our Terribleness* (1970) forms a wayfinding manual of black style, sound, and movement to (re)root the black community within the urban landscape; having been subject to sociopolitical barriers that intentionally limit access to a sense of place that benefits the black community, Baraka's poetic interventions inspired the uprisings of the community and the transformation of controlled space into occupied place in Newark.

My discussion herein focuses on *It's Nation Time* and *In Our Terribleness* not only because they are representative examples of Baraka's demonic *poethic*, but because *In Our Terribleness*, in particular, remains largely ignored by critics. It is important to note, however, that Baraka's fused aesthetic and geographic resistance was firmly established in his earlier work, most notably in his poetic manifesto "Black Art" (first published in 1966). By invoking poems "like fists," "that wrestle," "cracking / steel knuckles," (*Black Magic* 116) Baraka insists that poems must become *tools* of social action that serve the function of revolution rather than merely convey feeling. In this poem, Baraka solidifies himself as the voice of the black community, with the collective consciousness of black struggle being mediated through his words. This building collective tension builds to a crescendo in the poem's final declaration:

> We want a black poem. And a
>
> Black World.
>
> Let the world be a Black Poem
>
> And Let All Black People Speak This Poem
>
> Silently
>
> or LOUD (*Black Magic* 117)

Here, Baraka intensifies the field poetic such that it is no longer enough for poems to reflect the world, but that the world itself must become a "Black Poem," a field of total experience. "Black Art" not only calls for a collective union in urban space, it also prophesies the radical transformative changes to come.

In *In Our Terribleness*, Baraka found the grounds of innovation and experimentation in form and content that he was seeking in a "Black Poem." The demonic *poethic* established in "Black Art" and later developed in *It's Nation Time* and *In Our Terribleness* evolved into an armed strategy of resistance, one where poems become a weaponized means of resisting and transforming existing spatial structures of control on the ground and in the streets of lived experience. *In Our Terribleness* adopts the experimental forms and energies of the field poetic and harnesses these methods for the transformation of black urban consciousness. It is a collaborative effort between Baraka and Fundi (Billy Abernathy), a Chicago Black Arts

photographer. Combining Baraka's poetry with Fundi's photographs of black residents of Newark into an "imagetext" (Crawford 24), the work experiments with the fusion of urban geography and the energies of language in poetry. *In Our Terribleness* falls in line with a tradition of collaborative "imagetexts" by black American artists, such as Richard Wright and Edwin Rosskam's *12 Million Black Voices* (1941) and Langston Hughes and Roy DeCarava's *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* (1955). The work creates an interactive whole out of the combined aesthetics of poetry, prose, and photography. The images of "everyday" black people situated in the inner-city landscape—on subways, on stoops, in the streets—are responded to with stanzas of poetry, thereby articulating a dynamic picture of lived geography from the particular lens of urban blackness. In mirroring the embodied art and language of a local community (as also evidenced by the collection's silver shiny cover that acts as a mirror), the text both *says* and, coupled with further action on the ground, *creates* a nation of black individuals in postwar America working collectively and actively towards transformative sociopolitical change.

Baraka's actions and political involvement in the late 60s and into the early 70s further tests the boundaries of the open field poetic methodology by combining poetic experimentation with intervening physical action on the streets. As Jerry Watts notes, Baraka's level of political engagement in the years between 1967 and 1974 is unprecedented for a twentieth century American artist/intellectual (349). Watts qualifies this statement by saying that while many intellectuals of the time wrote political artistic works, they were rarely active beyond the page and into the streets. As he writes, "It was unheard of for an established poet/playwright of Baraka's stature to take the lead in formulating political actions (e.g. establishing picket lines, leading boycotts, disrupting school board meetings, organizing electoral candidates, trying to build needed public housing) while continuing to write" (349).[6] Accordingly, the projected urban space of self-governed community that Baraka heralded in *It's Nation Time* and *In Our Terribleness* ceases to remain only imagined and, by means of intervening political work, becomes a reality in post-riot Newark. The hellfire of the 1967 Newark rebellion fulfilled the prophecy of Baraka's earlier work by paving the way for a reterritorialization of the ghetto and a revitalization of the local community. Armed with the revolutionary rhetoric of his polemical poems, Baraka was ready to

put talk to action. As Baraka reflects on the Newark riots, "For me, the Rebellion was a cleansing fire" (*The Autobiography* 266). Indeed, the destruction of the riots led, ultimately, to the creation of new ground: Newark, the city that contained its black population in structures of poverty and disenfranchisement became known by Baraka and the arts community as "New Ark," the rehabilitated city space where grassroots community projects transformed the space for the people.

This rebirth of the city as New Ark recalls the biblical story of Noah's Ark.[7] As Werner Sollors argues, Baraka becomes a Noah figure for the Black Arts Movement and its post-rebellion reterritorialization of Newark: "Baraka offered himself as a new Noah, ready to lead his chosen people out of American bondage in his 'New Ark'" (50). Works such as *It's Nation Time* and *In Our Terribleness*, wherein Baraka practices place in postwar urban space, become the grounding for experimentations in actual space, for the establishment of self-managing communities. In an essay from 1970, Baraka baptizes the city as a site of resistance and renewal:

> Newark, New Ark, the nationalist sees as the creation of a base, as example, upon which one aspect of the entire Black nation can be built. …We will create agencies to teach community organizing, national and local politics, and send brothers all over the country to re-create the model. We will nationalize the city's institutions as if it were liberated territory in Zimbabwe or Angola. There are nations of less than 300,000 people. … We will build a 'city-state,' or make alliances throughout the area to develop regional power in the scatter of Black cities of northern New Jersey. (*Raise* 163)

The Newark riots lit the ground on fire, so to speak, and paved the way for a geographic "changing of hands" heralded by Baraka's earlier work.[8] As Watts correctly points out, "Baraka's understanding of urban political power was a fantasy" that presented an exclusionary and homogenous "value system" and essentialized blackness that "imagined black communities as uniform in character and ambitions" (363). While Watts's criticism is certainly important to point out—and is later validated by Baraka's own questioning of his staunch black nationalism of the time—it is almost too obvious to warrant further criticism at this juncture.[9] What most concerns my discussion here is

Baraka's testament to the continued power of the imagination coupled with direct action on the streets. In connecting the sociopolitical transformation of New Ark to the conditions in "Zimbabwe or Angola," Baraka suggests that the transformative consciousness on the ground in this new "nation" will spill over its local borders to become a wide-reaching geographic movement. New Ark, then, becomes a demonic ground from which the black nation can uprise and take control over its space and place. Signifying more than just a metaphor of "the ark" as a place of salvage and redemption, New Ark signals the ability for art to encompass and transform material actuality through everyday practices of living—what McKittrick might call "more humanly workable geographies" (xii)—that produce newly transformed place.

Indeed, Baraka directly refers to New Ark as a "city-state" (*Raise* 163); he sees the smaller scale of the local, coupled with a united vision for communal emancipation therein, to be the grounding site for reforming nations worldwide. This move to "nationalize" New Ark as a "liberated territory" by taking over the institutions of the city signals Baraka's reimagination of the nation. As he writes in *In Our Terribleness*, the goal is "the creation of the nation where we stand … master of [our] own space. Institutional space and territorial space … Picture ourselves as free rulers of all (our) space" (n.p.). Baraka saw the nation as an imagined construct that is alterable through language, art, and communal practice. Because it can be imagined, it can also be re-imagined, and through active community-building on the ground of the local, it can materialize into an interconnected, translocal reality—one that moves and expands with the people as they move and expand. In his short collection aptly entitled *It's Nation Time* (1970), Baraka calls upon such a reimagination of the nation:

> The nation is like our selves, together
>
> seen in our various scenes, sets where ever we are
>
> what ever we are doing, is what the nation
>
> is
>
> doing
>
> or
>
> not
>
> doing

is what the nation

is

being

or

not being. (7)

Here the nation is reimagined as a living collective organism where members exist in close proximity of spirit, whether they are close in distance or not. In this reimagined community of the nation, there is a sense of responsibility and cause; rather than being an abstract notion of comradeship, the very construct of the nation is here dependent on the direct actions of its members for its "doing" and "being."

As Tyner observes, spatial transformation—not simply imagining reterritorialized geographies, but living them through—is imperative to the project of black radicalism. As he argues, in line with McKittrick, "Black radicalism is about alternative geographies, of social and spatial transformations; black radicalism is about the remaking of spaces" (8). The process of remaking space in black radicalism is also an act of ideological revisionism that brings ideas, necessarily, into reality. "The epistemology of black radicalism," Tyner continues, "is thus predicated on a ground-level reality. Indeed, Black radical intellectual production oftentimes began with an engagement and dialogue with Western radical political ideas, and then moved on to a critique of these ideas as their incompleteness was revealed" (9). [10] Baraka's poetic trajectory is similar: he began, in Greenwich Village, by engaging with and practicing the radical political and aesthetic ideologies of his Black Mountain contemporaries; however, over the course of the decade, this engagement would expose the "incompleteness," for Baraka, in the tenets of open field poetics. As he writes in *In Our Terribleness*, conscious awareness must accompany responsive, material groundwork:

Not just idle screams (to work off the sensual connection with this

rotten chapter of world).

But programs. Systems. Things that move and will grow. Living

> strategems to free and build. Political projects. Communications
>
> Projects. Educational projects. And on. Go head. Do it, if you
>
> gonna talk it. You better do it. (n.p.)

As this work demonstrates, while the imagination is certainly a catalyst for social change, the transformation of geography on the ground begins with its transformation in collective consciousness; for Baraka, such material transformations begin with aesthetic (re) imaginings of place. The text experiments with articulating the black body—and the collective body of the whole—as it moves through urban space and resonates with its environment. The Black Mountain influence is palpable here in the text's concern for the body moving through a quantum field, with both body and landscape forming a dynamic interactive whole: "each of us is a vector / carrying meaning" (Baraka, *In Our Terribleness* n.p.). This meaning is a totality achieved through the contrapuntal rhythms of both image and text. The images dispersed throughout, as Baraka writes, are "conductors of energy. … all as vectors of the one Being. Us, we talking about" (n.p.) The people depicted in the images, together with the language and style of the text, create a moving, energetic whole: "So we are parts of a body. And this is what you see. The energy / revealed" (n.p.). With these lines, Baraka harnesses the energy of the field as a collective creative force, one that transforms the urban space into a dynamic aesthetic place of black art. In this way, the work fulfills his earlier declaration in "Black Art": "Let Black People understand / that they … Are poems and poets" (*Black Magic* 117).

While at first the term "terribleness" in the work's title seems counterintuitive as a descriptor for the particular beauty of blackness, Baraka is playing with the perceived misplacedness of the black body by the white gaze. Baraka resists this "knowing" and placing of black people by illuminating the urban black body as a demonic ground; by mirroring the projective soundings and movements of the black body in urban space, he makes unequivocal the "terrible" beauty and resonance of black people and black communities. As Baraka writes, "Terribleness is a definition. It / is a description. … But it is commoner than that. All /our terribleness is our total. Our hipness is in anything we touch" (n.p.). Critic and historian George Cotkin praises *In Our*

*Terribleness* as a "welcome relief from the hurricane of hate" that infused Baraka's poetry of the time, but he insists that the work remains "uncritical of black life and the problems of urban ghettoes" (267). Cotkin's assertion overlooks the ways in which Baraka and Fundi acutely engage with urban space as a meaningful site of connection that fosters a new consciousness of blackness in place. While Baraka does indeed romanticize the "terribleness" of blackness in urban space, he does so in order to articulate an alternative black urban experience other than the circumscribed narrative created by the white gaze. In the text, the lines, "They had us in a cage / To hold back our rage. Our eyes / smiled / anyway" (n.p.) respond to an image of young black youth looking out from behind the "caged" screen of a window in a building that resembles a housing project. Baraka uses aesthetic survival as a catalyst to mobilize the community, unhinge their landscape from structures of control, and transform reality both in art and on the streets.

*In Our Terribleness* and the Newark crisis, when considered together, elucidate Baraka's keen awareness of the fact that racial subjugation is an intentional strategy of spatial containment by governing structures of power. Further, they demonstrate the felt and then realized need for demonic spatial intervention by grafting aesthetic and imaginative reconceptions of space onto actual geographies in urban space.

Demonic grounds render geographies both fluid and disruptive; as the word "demonic" suggests, unpredictability is central to its effectiveness as an oppositional geographical mode. The roots of the term, as Wynter and McKittrick elucidate, is in mathematics, physics, and computer science. The demonic is defined by

> a non-deterministic schema; it is a process that is hinged on uncertainty and non-linearity because the organizing principle cannot predict the future. This schema, this way of producing or desiring an outcome, calls into question 'the always non-arbitrary, pre-prescribed' parameters of sequential and classificatory linearity. (McKittrick xxiv)

Here McKittrick quotes directly from Wynter (365), who uses the demonic to identify epistemological systems that cannot exist meaningfully within existing structures of knowledge and theory—whether by their exclusion or erasure. The non-linearity of the demonic, then, opens a pathway through dominant geographic narratives to

allow for black people to reimagine their position vis a vis structures of control. The efficacy of the demonic depends on its autonomous unfolding, on its ability to exist outside hegemonic codes of meaning and control and to create an alternative semantic economy. Through geographical experimentation, geographical transformation is possible, and New Ark serves as a shining example.

To further develop this argument, it is necessary to examine the particular context of Newark as a site of containment and control by the white governing class, as well as the specific sites of resistance established by Baraka and the black community. Newark is often cited as a case in point of what Komozi Woodard calls the "postwar ghetto crisis" ("Message" 80) that boiled over in 1967, leading to "the greatest wave of urban violence the nation had ever seen" (Zinn 132).[11] These urban neighborhoods (also in Detroit, Chicago, and Cleveland, among many other cities) were severely underserviced by governmental services, leading to extreme poverty, unemployment, substandard housing conditions, and police brutality, and these conditions pushed the black residents to a breaking point. The urban crisis incensed the growing tensions in the community between black residents of the ghetto—in which an increasing Black Power sentiment was being fostered—and the wealthy white minority that largely controlled the political and economic reigns of Newark (Upchurch 36). One of many central organizations that Baraka helped to found was CFUN (Committee for a Unified New Ark). CFUN's mandate of self-government for the black community was fostered through a commitment to sociopolitical and cultural independence. As Woodard notes, CFUN's efforts were directly responsive to the containment culture of the governing white classes, which sought to keep the black community in place: "One important driving force in that process was the utter collapse of basic government and commercial services in the postwar ghetto" (Woodard, "Message" 92). The organization was instrumental in the establishment of independent social services, cooperative employment initiatives, and cultural centers in the post-Newark rebellion. Amina Baraka, Baraka's second wife, was also critical to the establishment of these creative demonic grounds: she was an active community-builder at Spirit House, and, along with the United Sisters of CFUN, she helped found the African Free School, which became a critical prototype for other independent black-centric schools nation-wide.[12]

Aside from political initiatives on the local and national scale, Baraka and his affiliated organizations under the general banner of the Black Power Movement (Black Community Development and Defense and The Modern Black Convention Movement, to name a few) also fostered cultural and artistic development within the black local community. Aside from establishing theatre centers such as Spirit House, Baraka was also central to the establishment of independent newspapers—*Black NewArk* and *Unity and Struggle*—that reached both local and national readership, respectively. Baraka continued to flourish as a literary producer and publisher; he established *Cricket*, a journal of jazz criticism, as well as Jihad Publications, an independent black publisher. A host of youth programs, schools, and radio programs were also established (Woodard, *A Nation* 2). That the imbrication of aesthetic and political energy was at the center of Baraka's engagements at the time is obvious; as he puts it plainly in his autobiography, "art and politics [are] not mutually exclusive" (*The Autobiography* 167). This creation of a demonic ground in the black city-state involves a responsive process of recognizing the mechanics of existing structures of control and responding to these with alternative, demonic practices of place. As Baraka recognizes in "Sermon for our Maturity,"

> We drift in space
>
> as circles of feeling
>
> All the presence of invisible influence
>
> Controls the paths we take
>
> Make the invisible visible
>
> within yr space
>
> See the things you need to see
>
> And know they exist
>
> The world shapes and is to be shaped (*It's Nation Time* 14)

Here, Baraka encourages the black community to take stock of their space—to understand how their movements through space are "shaped" by the "invisible influence" of external forces of control. Then, once the community gains this spatial knowledge and "sees the things it needs to see," they can proceed to shape the world by making

visible the living landscape of their story—its uprising demonic grounds, nations, and worlds.

To be sure, Baraka's efforts in New Ark, which led to permanent change in the community, were not without failures—or, figments of a spatial imaginary that failed to materialize. The latter definition is more fitting, since imagined geographies are political acts that are significant to the process of reterritorialization. Indeed, as McKittrick notes, just the very "sayability" (xxiii) of imagined or proposed geographies interrupts occupied centers of control. As she argues, "'saying,' imagining, and living geography locates the kinds of creative and material openings traditional geographic arrangements disclose and conceal" (144). Baraka's emphasis on the black community's projective sound and sayability in *In Our Terribleness* creates a counter-narrative of urban space. The invocation of "terrible" as a descriptor for blackness and black experience emphasizes its alterity, its "unknowability," and its creativity outside white systems of control and signification. Indeed, the "concealed" narratives of the demonic mode—the experimental, creative response between the body and its environment—form integrated, "living" geographies that resist spatial oppression.

On the ground in New Ark, there were many imagined and "sayable" geographies that were proposed by Baraka and his affiliated organizations. The most significant was the proposed collaborative project of Kawaida Towers, a housing complex proposed by CFUN in 1972 that was meant not only to provide housing but, like Spirit House before it, was to be a central site of creative freedom and exploration for the black community. [13] Despite the promising change that the towers represented, the plans failed to come to fruition due to a series of racially-motivated events and decisions. The fate of the Towers was sealed by a city council vote to reject the proposed tax exemption that was crucial to fund the building. As Woodard explains, the inciting incident of the project's failure was a challenge posed by a Rutgers professor who questioned the supposed cultural exclusivity of the towers. Since the towers were to be built in the North Ward of Newark, a predominantly white area, the professor asked why the project centered on African cultural traditions and excluded the area's Italian heritage. This challenge ignited the fumes of racial tension between whites and blacks in the community. Soon after, mostly white picketers protested against the building of the towers, eventually successfully halting the construction process at the site (Woodard, *A Nation* 231). Subsequently,

Kenneth Gibson, the black mayor who was helped into office by the efforts of Baraka and the black community in Newark, rallied against the project. The tax exemption previously granted to the community housing project was then overturned, and the project came to a permanent halt in 1974 (251-253).

Although some geographic interventions in Newark would remain imagined, the post-rebellion initiatives led by the black community are demonstrations of the ways in which the establishment of demonic grounds of resistance can alter existing oppressive codes of space and place. McKittrick argues that "the ungeographic is a colonial fiction" (5) wherein the enslavement, captivity, and dispersal of black bodies places them "outside" of geography and space in terms of agency, possession, and production. Along these lines, the ghettoized black spaces of Newark similarly attempt to render their inhabitants "ungeographic": with the black community having limited access to social services, housing, and opportunity, the boundaries that enclose the black wards of Newark from the white community keeps the black community "in place" according to racialized geographic codes. This process of urban geographic dispossession in the black community began to pick up steam in the 1950s, at a time when Newark saw much prosperity as businesses flourished and opportunities for the mostly white population were fruitful. In the same decade, a huge migration of "tens of thousands" of black migrants traveled up from the southern states in search of employment and opportunity in the city. The black population faced segregation and was met with hostility by the white community, including local residents, business owners, and city government (Wharton 11-12). This active displacement of black Newarkers by the white community and government led to a precarious claim to space for the black population; however, through grassroots uprisings and the establishment of allied institutions, the black community counteracted geographic dispossession with demonic grounds of geographic liberation and independence.

In their engagements with dominant geographic schemes, demonic grounds "identify a different way of knowing and writing the social world and … expand how the production of space is achieved across terrains of domination" (McKittrick xiv). The establishment of alternative schools, social programs, housing, and community services as a grassroots effort by the community reterritorializes Newark as the demonic ground of New Ark. As Woodard confirms,

"The cultural nationalist strategy of African American militants was to develop parallel black institutions in that void left by the urban crisis" ("Message" 92).[14] Although the project of Baraka's black nationalism was certainly interested in overthrowing and eradicating the white power structures of control, it did not do so in an effort to displace or mimic these structures, but to establish parallel structures that serve the independent, self-governing black community that had been ignored by "benign neglect." Indeed, McKittrick is careful to suggest that the demonic does not operate as a displacement of dominant geographic schemas—it serves not to eradicate them, but to exist *alongside* them as alternative narratives. For, as she notes, the spatial knowledges possessed by black people are particular and specific in and of themselves, and the beauty with which Baraka illuminates the "terribleness" of blackness in *In Our Terribleness* is a testament to this. The tone of Baraka's *It's Nation Time* is similarly confirming of the beauty that exists in blackness as it resonates within space:

> Yr body is all space
>
> Yr feet is valley makers
>
> …
>
> Sing about your pure movement
>
> in space
>
> Grow (16)

The transformation of Newark into New Ark, then, exceeds the metaphor of its new namesake by representing the power of poetry in action to transform "geographies of domination" (McKittrick xi). Further to this point, the community-based activism transformed more than just the spatial codes and ordinances of Newark: it altered the ways in which the place resonates for the black community as a signifier of place. In *In Our Terribleness*, Baraka refers to the cities as alien spaces of white power and control; as such, cities appear to the speaker as "ugly" and as "examples / of white art. white feeling" along with "the laws, the rule (s), the ethos" (n.p.). However, Baraka's demonic *poethic*—his poetic work on the page coupled with his political work on the streets—engenders a transformation of urban space. The spatial awareness fostered by Baraka initiated a shift in communal consciousness that redefined the space of the postwar ghetto—a spatial tool of geographic limitation put on black bodies—as a space of

flourishing community. But in order for this transformation to occur, a revised consciousness of responsibility was crucial. As Baraka insists in the poem *AFRIKAN REVOLUTION* (1973):

> Be conscious
>
> meet once a week
>
> Meet once a week. Talk about how to get
>
> more money, how to get educated, how
>
> to have scientists for children rather than
>
> junkies. How to kill the roaches. How to
>
> stop the toilet from stinking. How to get a
>
> better job. Once a week. Start NOW.
>
> How to dress better. How to read.
>
> How to live longer. How to be respected.
>
> Meet once a week. Once a week.
>
> All over the world. We need to meet once a
>
> week. (5)

The practice of place that Baraka first imagines in "Black Art" and develops in *It's Nation Time* and *In Our Terribleness* comes full circle into a *practice of living* in New Ark. Having fully abandoned the notion of poetry as purely imaginative and ornamental, here Baraka uses poetry didactically to provide a guidebook of the new collective consciousness needed to transform the space of black oppression to one of self-determined liberation. As a manual of self-governance for the black community, here the poem walks the talk: Baraka offers practical means by which the community can uprise from its oppression and gain the self-knowledge needed to transform its space into meaningful place. To help accomplish this, Baraka establishes creative sites of resistance, both materialized and imagined—Spirit House, BARTS, Kawaida Towers, among many. These spaces transformed the limited geography of the community into a vibrant working collective.[15]

The effect was widely transformational: Baraka's established

demonic grounds became models for black nation-building in the United States. As Édouard Glissant writes, the "decisive act" of the writer "consists also of building a nation" and "assembl[ing] a common will by which *we* might be forged" (*Poetic Intention* 171; my emphasis). Hence Baraka's later rallying cry in the poem "It's Nation Time": "Time to get / together / time to be one strong fast black energy space / one pulsating positive magnetism, rising" (21). In calling for the establishment of a "fast black energy space," he continues to use the language of open field poetic composition, but towards the ends of actual spatial transformation on the ground of reality. Taking cue from the localized efforts in the New Ark reterritorialization, Baraka calls to the national community to come into a compounded awareness. As he writes in his *Autobiography*, "many of us feel since we are 'anti-establishment' that that makes us heroes. Nonsense. Most such anti-establishmentarianism is just petty bourgeois anarchism and failure to take up the responsibility intellectuals had better understand they have to actually help make life better for all of us" (237-238).

To "actually help make life better," Baraka's demonic *poethic* developed from the open field of his early Black Mountain peers into a radical, translocal nation wherein language and communal action coalesce into a "more humanly workable" geography. It is a nation wherein poems, as "steel knuckles," "teeth," and "lemons piled / on a step" become a means of not only imagining space but saying it into action. And so, in harnessing the energy of this "fast black energy space" to construct communal places of resistance to counter spatial oppression, Baraka's demonic *poethic*, while refusing to stay "in place," contributes to an ongoing reading and writing practice that can be used to uncover how place is constructed, and how uneven geographies may be engaged with, contested, and transformed in art and in social practice. His aesthetic and political experimentations both on the page and on the ground demonstrate how a community's resistant spatial imaginary may be grafted onto actual space, with the rebuilt New Ark signaling the transformation of boundary into *frontier*.

## Notes

[1] "How You Sound??" is a short essay by Baraka on projective verse that was published in Donald Allen's 1960 anthology *New American Poetry* alongside work from Baraka's Black Mountain, New York, and San Francisco contemporaries.

[2] An exemplary case of Baraka's adoption of projective verse in his first collection of poetry, *Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note* (1961) is "From an Almanac" (3), the poem dedicated to Olson (or "C.O." as Baraka refers to him). Many other poems in this collection, such as "Hymn for Lanie Poo," and "Look for You Yesterday, Here You Come Today," are projective poems that employ the hallmarks of the form, such as innovative spacing in the field of the page and rapid successions of images mixed with social commentary.

[3] Although the scholarship on the political and poetical geographies of Baraka's work is scant, it is worth noting James Smethurst's *The Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s* (2005) and Michael Simanga's *Amiri Baraka and the Congress of African People: History and Memory* (2015), which both discuss the local initiatives and organizations, as well as the geographic reach of the Black Arts Movement.

[4] The term "demonic" appears in Wynter's essay "Beyond Miranda's Meanings: Un/Silencing the 'Demonic Ground' of Caliban's 'Woman.'" The work is an analysis of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, wherein she comments on the connection between reproduction and land reclamation. As she argues, the absence in the play of "Caliban's potential mate through whom the reproduction of his race might occur" (McKittrick xxv), prevents the island from being reclaimed by its native population.

[5] See Retallack's *The Poethical Wager*.

[6] Before the riots, for example, Baraka was instrumental in the election of the first black mayor of Newark, Kenneth Gibson. The event was historically monumental: never before had a black mayor been elected in a large American city (Watts 348).

[7] According to *The Book of Genesis*, after humankind broke the covenant with God and was punished with a flood, Noah was

spared by God in order to preserve life on earth. He was tasked with boarding his family as well as one male and one female of every species onto an ark to escape the flood waters.

[8] It lies outside the scope of this article to discuss at length, but it is worth noting that the nation-building efforts of the Newark riots likely inspired other rebellions and uprisings of black communities across the nation, with the Detroit riots happening only a couple weeks after those in Newark in 1967.

[9] Baraka came to denounce the tone of his earlier black nationalist phase as misdirected vitriol against whites. Whereas the black nationalists focused on the white population as the enemy of black people, Baraka later came to Marxism as a means of understanding capitalism as a system of oppression that not only fuels racist structures of power, but is the enemy that ensnares the whole of humanity. In his autobiography, he reflects on the tunnel vision of his early "reactionary" politics: "Earlier our own poems came from an enraptured patriotism that screamed against whites as the eternal enemies of Black people, as the sole cause of our disorder & oppression. The same subjective mystification led to mysticism, metaphysics, spookism, etc., rather than dealing with reality, as well as an ultimately reactionary nationalism that served no interests but our newly emerging Black bureaucratic elite and petty bourgeois, so they would have control over their Black market" (238). Indeed, it is Baraka's realization that it is capitalist America—not simply the racial tensions therein—that keeps black people in place that ushers in the Third World Marxist phase of his life and career in the mid-1970s.

[10] This section touches on just some of the many interventionist initiatives led by Baraka and his affiliated organizations on the ground in Newark. For an extended and excellent discussion of Baraka's political engagements in Newark, see Woodard's *A Nation Within A Nation* (1999) (Woodard was also a fellow CFUN member with Baraka).

[11] Although rumblings of the Newark rebellion had been growing for a long time, there were two inciting incidents of the actual riots: first was the decision by the city planning committee to confiscate and sell a 150-acre plot of land in the center of the black community to build

a medical school. The local black community was already suffering from lack of suitable housing, so losing the housing complex on this plot of land would further devastate living conditions. Second, a riot broke out after police arrested and severely beat a black cab driver after a routine traffic stop. Days of intense rioting broke out after the incident, leading to 23 deaths (21 of which were black, and two white) (Upchurch 38). It was during these days of rebellion that Baraka was arrested and severely beaten by the police.

[12] Given her background as an artist and dancer, Amina Baraka knew intimately the power of creative expression to build communities, and she did just that. In his autobiography, Baraka credits her "great innovative and creative influence" on CFUN and the other cultural spaces they established, and notes that "[i]t was she who actually designed in the most practical way such an impractical idea as communal living under capitalism" (*The Autobiography* 419).

[13] The plans for Kawaida Towers as a practical housing site but moreso as a site of creative opportunity are elucidated by Woodard: "Kawaida Towers apartment building was designed with a basement and first-floor plan providing for a 300-seat theater with lighting, projection, and dressing rooms; a lounge, woodshop, hobby shop, day care center, and public kitchen; and rooms for art display, reading, and arts and crafts" (*A Nation* 228).

[14] The urban crisis Woodard speaks of centers around the controversial policy of "benign neglect" in racial matters in America, as proposed in 1969 by Daniel Patrick Moynihan to President Nixon. As Moynihan writes in a memorandum to the president, "The time may have come when the issue of race could benefit from a period of 'benign neglect'" (qtd. in Kotlowski 173).

[15] Baraka's efforts with CFUN also fostered solidarity efforts with Newark's Puerto Rican minority community (together, the black and Puerto Rican community constituted over 65 percent of the population), resulting in a "Community Choice" slate of political candidates for the 1970 election in Newark (Woodard, *A Nation* 114-115).

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