

Racial Conflict and Baraka's Activitism**Afaque Ahmad Khan**

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ABSTRACT

Baraka's political ideologies have been oversimplified. Too often, his legacy is frozen far in the past, and commentators rarely explore his latest works. In Daniel Maltin's 2013 *On the Corner: African American Intellectuals and the Urban Crisis*, for example, the chapter on Baraka, speciously titled 'Be Even Blacker: Amiri Baraka's Names and Places,' drops off shortly after 1974, as if the named writer-activist ceases to exist in any place after this particular year. Despite its publication in 2001, Watts' otherwise extensive and ultimately rather scathing study of Baraka fails to address the revolutionary artist's later work of the 1990s. In fact, most contemporary critics treat him as though he did not continue to evolve. Shortly before his death, Baraka was scheduled to present a reading on 12 April 2014 at the University of Kent for a major international conference held in his honor titled 'Baraka at 80.' Though it would not be apparent from the majority of scholarship regarding his drama, Baraka continued to produce revolutionary plays throughout the 1990s and up through the present. When I spoke to him in November 2011, at a reception held after The Guild Theatre lecture in Sacramento, California, Baraka disclosed that he had just recently finished a play about W.E.B. Du Bois titled *The Most Dangerous Man in America*, which he hoped to stage at Woodie King Jr.'s New Federal Theatre. Only time will tell if this newly completed play will in fact receive a full production; what remains even more

questionable, though, is how or why Baraka's accessible later dramatic work is consistently marginalized.

KEYWORDS: Art & Activism, Black Nationalism, Slave, Brutality, African, Amiri Baraka

INTRODUCTION

An attempt to explain away such a lack of scholarship by defining Baraka's accessible drama of the 1990s as too controversial, or too against the mainstream, seems questionable. I argue that all of Baraka's dramatic work challenges traditional representations of American theatre, and given the scholarship that does exist on Baraka, critics tend to agree. If, by contrast, scholars have considered the later works artistically unworthy of criticism or attention, this chapter endeavors to set the record straight by unveiling their theatrical potentialities as part of the case for a re-evaluation of Baraka's 1990s work. Essentially, this chapter breaks the critical deadlock. During the 1990s Baraka continued to explore themes of murder and death in revolutionary plays inspired by his Marxist ideology. Moreover, despite the lack of critical attention given to these plays, his commitment to provoke audiences through drama seemed to intensify as a new decade dawned. In his 1990 essay, 'Art & the Political Crisis,' Baraka prophesized:

It is necessary to reorganize an international Black Arts Movement like the '20s Renaissance, Harlem Renaissance with the force and focus of the '60s Black Arts Movement or the 19th Century Black Convention and Slave Narrative Anti Slavery outbursts. Art carries peoples' lives, history, present and projects their future. If the art is allowed to live, be exposed and influence, then more and more people are molded by it. And what the art wants the people see and feel and want. Art valorizes and glorifies our lives. That's why it's so dangerous. (*Razor* 428)

Just two years later, however, tragedy struck Baraka's family, proving real life was no less dangerous; in 1992, as a dreadful example of life mirroring Baraka's representations of violence in art, Amina and Amiri's youngest son was shot in the head and severely wounded. Beginning with a brief introduction to Baraka's activism in the early '90s, along with details of his son's tragic misfortune, and Baraka's evolving politics, this chapter culminates with in-depth analyses of *Jack Pot Melting: A Commercial*, *The Election Machine Warehouse*, and *General Hag's Skeezag*, all published in the '90s and performed together for the Nuyorican Poets Café Theater in 1996. I argue that, while Baraka continued to dramatize conditions in the struggle for liberation for both Blacks and the working-class, rather than depict onstage killing or murder, these plays present America's threat of death as a means to invoke audience reaction. Perhaps, after focusing on the strength of family unity in *Song*, the haunting threat of his son's death further inspired new dramatic representations. Once again, in the new decade of the '90s, Baraka slightly adjusts his message, most likely, as a result of the recent personal tragedy. Far from taming or muting his Marxist fervor, the three plays analyzed within the pages of this chapter warn audiences of the very real danger present in America. As this chapter's epigraphs suggest, Baraka sees America as the ultimate symbol of death, built on the life of an unattainable American dream. Unlike his drama of the past, a new dramatic message, presented in his theatre of the mid '90s, foregoes reactionary forms of killing as a means of self defense, and focuses on exposing the deadly American bourgeoisie as a major threat to the proletariat. Each play recalls aspects of Theodore Ward's 1938 Marxist drama *Big White Fog*, a major influence on Baraka's later plays, to present characters, and thereby audiences, with a unique death threat while simultaneously attacking different aspects of the Capitalist American society—*Jack Pot Melting* and *The Election Machine Warehouse* tackle the mainstream American media in different eras, while *General Hag* presents the urban drug trade as a metaphor for political corruption.

Concepts of murder and killing are peppered throughout Baraka's writings of the 1980s. Throughout this work, with regard to art and drama, Broadway, Hollywood, or the American commercial arts machine more generally, are often personified as the murderer. Of course, Baraka's words, written to provoke activism, attack the American majority and offer an avant-

garde alternative. In an essay titled ‘Symposium on Institution Building: A Reanalysis of the Role and Nature of Arts Organizations,’ written in the 1980s, Baraka declares, ‘It is better that we be able to get twenty people in a room and perform the great works of history, the present and the future than be murdered mentally, metaphorically and literally by yet another Anglo-Broadway garbage can’ (*Razor* 357). Predictably, by the start of the new decade, Baraka continued this attack on the mainstream and relentlessly promoted self-determination through independent production. Specifically for Baraka, though, a major Hollywood picture scheduled to begin shooting in the early ‘90s hit too close to home. Baraka saw Warner Brother’s 1992 production of Spike Lee’s film *Malcolm X* as a personal affront, and has continued to link the Academy Award Nominated film as a key example of America’s propensity to murder the truth through the distribution and sale of an omnipresent white lie (Baraka, *Razor* 372-376). Lee’s involvement with the film did not appease Baraka and only served to incite a more severe critique. Despite, or perhaps in spite of, his growing reputation as an outspoken Black film director and activist in his own right, as well as the relative success within Black communities of his early films, *School Daze* (1988), *Do The Right Thing* (1989), and *Mo’ Better Blues* (1990), Lee is held responsible, by Baraka at least, for aiding Hollywood in the commoditization of Malcolm X. With Warner Brother’s backing, the ‘X,’ a former symbol of Black revolution and liberation, now stamps clothing and merchandise to rake in the cash. In 1991 Baraka noted abrasively, ‘Even Malcolm’s “X” has already been transformed into a commercial symbol, now it can be sold, for Spike that X is simply a multiplication sign, as Spike Lee’s Joint opened this morning in NY City’s Macys!’ (*Razor* 116). For Baraka this constitutes murder. The enemy, represented in this instance by Capitalist Hollywood, pimps and massacres the message and life of Malcolm for profit. Baraka’s point is clear: The oppressed have responsibility to create and present works which prompt change; Malcolm’s messages and life belong to Blacks and the working-class, and yet their voices are silenced as American conglomerates reshape American history through mass control of theatre, film, and broadcasting. In an essay titled ‘Shorty Is Alive & Well & Making Movies for Warner Bros.,’ written in 1993, Baraka proposes a solution to try and take back this control:

In my opinion the best thing spike and could do if they have any relationship to the

masses of the American people would be to permit open discussions after each showing of the film, in theaters all over the world. Then, even though the brothers Warner are going to make at least a quarter of a billion dollars on the film, there would be some value in it for the people as well. (*Razor* 376)

Herein lies the connection which links Baraka's drama throughout the decades. Since the '60s, despite ideological shifts, Baraka has set out to produce revolutionary drama for the people, first and foremost targeting a reaction from the oppressed. In 'Writers, Critics & Social Consciousness,' from 1994, Baraka expands upon this concept of a linked message through time and establishes clear connections between the nineteenth and twentieth century's: 'The 1860s parallel the 1960s revolution; the 1870s the 1970s presumed reconstruction, and now the 1990s parallel the 1890s, the destruction of Reconstruction' (*Razor* 147). Just as the so-called abolition of slavery in the south birthed the all too similar 'separate but equal' mantra of Jim Crow, Capitalist Imperialists of the '90s ruled as the lower classes toiled as second-class citizens, some, no doubt, still mollified by the successes of the Civil Rights and Black Liberation Movements of the '60s. First and foremost an activist, Baraka set out to break what he saw as blind complacency of the '90s and once again turned to drama as a weapon of choice. His own family nightmare, however, struck the same year audiences packed cinemas to watch Hollywood, in Baraka's estimation, murder Malcolm. In an essay entitled 'Newark, My Newark,' written in 1998, Baraka shares his family's personal tragedy involving the shooting of his youngest son, Ahi. Baraka's narrative reveals both his connection with family and ultimate heartbreak.

In June 1992, Amina and I gave a Father's Day gathering at our home and brought together close friends and their children with music and poetry and rounds of good feelings and pledges of recommitment to the family. After the gathering, our son, Amiri was taking a group of girls home when, at a traffic stop, a group of youths approached the car and pulled him out, robbed him, and took the car keys. Amiri, outraged, ran into one of his older brother's friends, who got the money and keys returned. But Amiri, still fuming, came home and got his younger brother and some of his pals to go back. They didn't realize that these boys were drug dealers, and when the car our boys were in approached the spot where Amiri had been victimized, shots

rang out from a .357 magnum handgun. The huge slug tore through the car door, and even though Ahi ducked, the bullet struck him at an angle on the side of his head and whipped around, still under his skin, until it stopped, bulging horribly out over his eye! The bullet did not, thank whatever, penetrate his skull, and this is the only good luck we claim.

In his 1994 essay 'Revolutionary Art,' Baraka remarks:

Even those of us who claim revolutionary stances spend most of our time talking about our enemies. When we criticize them, we expand our energy and force on them, rather than on the creation of the new, the transformative, rather than with the creation of what does not yet exist, which we must swear to bring into being, if we are truly revolutionary. (*Razor* 139)

Baraka references his desire to experiment with new forms of art; as a result, his most recent play, in terms of publication at least, presented as part of the Nuyorican trio, attempt to present a new form, for Baraka, of autobiographical dramatic representation. While he continues to name American Capitalism as the enemy, Baraka drastically changes his dramatic style by basing *The Election Machine Warehouse* solely on his real life memories of childhood. To be sure, plays of his past, such as *The Slave* or *A Recent Killing*, directly draw from or touch on autobiographical elements; but a close study of *Election* reveals a more intimate connection with the real life past of its sometimes enigmatic revolutionary author. Set in Baraka's hometown of Newark, New Jersey, *Election*, much like *Jack Pot*, promotes the themes of family and community, only this time in a new context; this particular play traces the history and threat of a manipulative and oppressive America through a lens of the past.

CONCLUSION

Amiri Baraka is a seminal figure in the development of contemporary black literature whose career has encompassed the Beat movement, Black Nationalism, and the tenets of Marxist-Leninist philosophy, and his verse is imbued with such concerns as cultural alienation, racial tension and conflict, and the necessity for social change through revolutionary means.

According to some scholars he succeeded James Baldwin and Richard Wright as one of the most prolific and persistent critics of post world war II America. He rejects western values and endeavors to create art with a film didactic purpose to forge a viable art form that reflects the true values of the African American community and of oppressed peoples throughout the world.

WORKS CITED

1. Baraka's account of this relationship in the autobiography is especially un-satisfactory (pp.188-200).
2. Hudson's interview with Hettie, (Hudson, p. 237-38) is especially revealing. The poem was published in Baraka.
3. The Dead Lecturer (New York: Grove Press, 1964), pp. 59-60.
4. Betty J. Collier and Louis N. Williams, " Black Revolutionary Literature of the Six-ties:
5. The Eurocentric World View Recycled" *Minority Voices* 2 (1978), 57-66, comments on this tendency among black writers generally, but the authors do not focus on Baraka or on "Black Art."
6. Baraka's "Black Dada Nihilisms" also blends these forms of magic. See Baraka, *The Dead Lecturer*, pp. 61-64