

## Reading Baraka against the Grain

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### **Abstract**

*Discussions about African-American poet and playwright Amiri Baraka's work often center on his relation to the American nation and its literary canon. There seem to be deliberate efforts from Baraka critics to inscribe him within the homogeneous landscape of the nation, although Baraka has been one of the staunchest critics of the American nation and confronted its imperialist ambition through politics and work. This paper proposes to read Amiri Baraka through a different set of aesthetic and political relations: through his proximity to the Third World's oppositional literary traditions. Placing Baraka within the vicinity of canonical American writers is certainly productive and important but, as this paper argues, reading the African American poet through his Third World oppositional lineage allows for a more dialectical understanding of his work.*

### **Introduction**

On November 24, 2011, renowned literary critic and Harvard University professor Helen Vendler published in the *New York Review of Books* a bitter review of the Rita Dove edited *The Penguin Anthology of American Poetry*. Questioning Dove's skill and literary taste, Vendler mentioned how Dove has allowed quantity to override quality, thus committing the crime of placing less important poets alongside the best of the twentieth century. Particularly vitriolic was her paragraph on Amiri Baraka who she sweepingly dismissed by gesticulating towards his poetic (in)ability. Quoting a stanza from Baraka's representative poem "Black Arts," she argued that this poem does not have the caliber to be anthologized in the same volume where so many great poets do not get proper attention. The poem's "showy violence" and adherence to oral language do not register true poetic excellence. Reproaching Dove for failing to understand this poem's banality, Vendler goes on to discredit Baraka in the following fashion:

Dove must realize that the new "literary standards" behind this example of Baraka's verse don't immediately declare themselves. Printing something in short lines doesn't make the writer a poet; it only makes him a person with a book of short lines. Nor is mere presence in the scene at a given moment enough to pronounce a person a poet. Although Dove mentions oral literature, orality has its own high standards (and we recognize them in action in everything from oral epic to Walt Whitman to black spirituals to Langston Hughes). If one wants evidence of black anger against "whites" and "jewladies" and "mulatto bitches," here it is. But a theme is not enough to make a poem. ("Are These the Poems to Remember?")

Despite her plain dualistic logic and limited understanding of resistance poetry put on display here, what is of significance is the way the tropological figure of "theme" has been erected

to dismiss not only Amiri Baraka but also the whole generation of Black Arts poets who used their verse not only to challenge what they saw as the thematic insipidity of American poetry but also the formal Eurocentrism inherent in what gets christened as “good poetry.” On the one hand, a line of descent beginning from oral epics to Whitman and Hughes has been established through a sweeping generalization and, on the other, the rhetoric of empty form has been played out by gesticulating towards Baraka’s poem’s reliance on theme only. Both ideas, I would argue, are pathological in that they stage a well rehearsed misunderstanding of not only Baraka’s poetic ability but also the complicated relation between his poetic form and thematic content. This misunderstanding, although often clad in other forms of understanding and logic as well, is pervasive. My arguments, therefore, will zero in on three issues arising out of the general paradigm of American academia’s reading of Baraka. First of all, I argue that various approaches towards Baraka’s poetry, especially recent evaluations of his poetic productions, constitute a particular paradigm which seeks to situate him within the American canon he deliberately distances himself from. Secondly, as I will try to show in my essay, there is a general tendency among critics to overlook the deep tension between form and content in Baraka’s poetry. Baraka’s provocative and acutely political thematic content often draws attention away from the inner dialectical tension between the Euro-American formal structure and the improvisational openness of jazz and blues forms that Baraka deliberately embraces so as to dig himself out of his early immersion in avant-garde urban tradition popularized by the Beat generation poets in the 1950s. Finally, I emphasize on the importance of situating Baraka within the broader constellation of oppositional poets whose works have been aptly described as “resistance poetry” by literary critic Barbara Harlow. The objective is to make visible the structural/thematic semblance corresponding to a broader homology that is discontinuous with the kind of aesthetic normativity Helen Vendler subscribes to, of which she is also a symptom.

### **The Problem of Reading Baraka**

One of the recurring themes of critical judgments on Baraka’s literary production has been his relation to the American canon—a debate to which Helen Vendler’s is just another addition. Long before Vendler’s brash dismissal of Baraka’s work, Ralph Ellison declined to endorse Baraka for MacArthur Grants saying “[he is] more interested in ideology than in art, and thus I suspect he has little attraction for those whose interest lies in advancing the arts of the country” (Muyumba 125). Both Vendler and Ellison view Baraka to be hostile to American literary tradition. While Vendler seeks to read Baraka’s “Black Arts” as an “evidence” of “black anger” against “whites,” “jewladies,” and “mulatto bitches,” thus elevating Baraka to the symptom of the *ressentiment* of the whole black race, Ellison notices in Baraka’s literary works dangerous infusion of political agency—“more” investments in “ideology” than Ellison would like to see. However, there is a strange semblance that runs like an invisible thread and binds these two social conservatives together. The literary standards Vendler invokes to foreclose Baraka’s claim to poetry is indeed the other name for the American canon which Ellison refers to when he talks about “the arts of our country.” Yet, Ellison’s denunciation of Baraka is more a case of disapproval of Baraka’s politicization of literature than of a casual rejection of his entire body of work; by suggesting that Baraka should immerse himself in the “experimental

theater,” Ellison at least acknowledges that Baraka has some literary potential.

Against such biased dismissals of Baraka, there are also numerous examples of carefully carved out critiques and productive readings. In his “Foreword” to Baraka’s *Transbluesency*, the editor of the volume, Paul Vangelisti, draws an analogy between Baraka and Pound. He claims that the selections of the edition trace “the ... career of a writer who, along with Ezra Pound, may be one of the most significant and least understood American poets of our century” (xi). Although the analogy between Pound and Baraka is deeply suggestive and requires attention, the second part of Vangelisti’s opinion needs to be looked at carefully because it also seeks to read Baraka in terms of his ability to fit in within the American canon. Notwithstanding the banality of the homology erected by his comment, Vangelisti needs to be credited for drawing our attention to academia’s failure to grasp the politics of Baraka’s constantly evolving artistic insight. His critique of the literary establishment in the later part of his foreword is a productive articulation of Baraka’s reluctance to be fully subsumed within the canon. That Baraka still remains “difficult to approach” needs to be seen as an outcome of his resistance to the totalizing desire of the neoliberal literary production industry; it is in this context that one has to make sense of the improvisational character of his poetry.

Both Paul Vangelisti and Walton Muyumba have tried to draw our attention to the evolutionary aspect of Baraka’s poetry. While Vangelisti has done so by suggesting how Baraka’s personal and political transformations have made him inaccessible to the literary establishment, Muyumba has shed light on Baraka’s evolution by putting it within a specific narrative frame and by focusing on the technical/aesthetic process that allows for this improvisational character. Muyumba too notices a pattern of purposeful (mis)reading of Baraka. Pointing at the characterization of Baraka by Ellison and the popular press as an “ideologue” devoid of depth and content, Muyumba attentively notes:

What all of this makes me think about is the general misunderstanding of black intellectuals or the tenets of black intellectual performance. What was missing from the talk around Jones/Baraka’s oeuvre was an understanding of how to read his poems, his essays, his ideological changes, or how to reconcile the motivations for his changes and metamorphoses. Jones/Baraka’s critical reception has become more about the collective weak misreading than about the writing itself. (126)

Muyumba correctly points out that discussions about Baraka seem to move more around his performance as an African American intellectual than around the body of work he has produced. However, having figured out the tendentious misreading of critics so adeptly, Muyumba surprisingly gets trapped in the same superficiality he critiques. Instead of engaging deeply with Baraka’s aesthetic transformation and looking deeply into various ideological, historical and aesthetic elements that mediate his transformation, Muyumba seeks to valorize a single source—techniques of jazz improvisation—as the worthy site of transgression/transformation. He fails to note how Baraka’s political transformations, especially his gradual move towards third world Marxism, inform and influence the formal features of his aesthetic works.

There is another form of evaluation that has asserted its voice strongly in the *agora* of Baraka criticism. Micropolitical textual readings focusing on ethnic, gender and sexual politics have been productive ways of looking at specific aspects of Baraka's work, though such readings often fail to account for the broader macropolitical horizon that not only informs but is also resisted by Baraka's work. Consider Patrick Roney's essay "The Paradox of Experience," for instance. While this essay is important in foregrounding an understanding of why and how Baraka's nationalist phase is significant, its stress on "the singular *experience* of African American ethnicity" is deeply problematic in the broader framework of the writer's evolutionary transformation. Whether or not Baraka has articulated a singular African American experience is questionable and can be contested in terms of various assertions made in his work. Let us consider his famous call to all black people in "SOS":

Calling black people  
 Calling all black people, man woman child  
 Wherever you are, calling you, urgent, come in  
 Black People, come in, wherever you are, urgent, calling  
 You, calling all black people  
 Calling all black people, come in, black people, come  
 on in. (*The Baraka Reader* 218)

Baraka's telegraphic call to all black people can be, of course, read as an expression of his desire for a separate African American nation, confirming his quest for a singular African American ethnic identity. Such an interpretation is also backed up by historical accounts and Baraka's own affirmation of this period as being overtly nationalistic. Yet, one cannot fully shrug away the idea that this call is not directed to an African American audience only; there is a broader community imagined through the figure of the dispersed people who have been urged to gather together. The figure of the "all black people" transcends nationalist boundaries and attests its solidarity with people of color across the border. If one is willing to stretch the interpretation farther one will get to see the shadow of oppressed masses—"the wretched of the earth" as Fanon famously phrased it in his eponymous book—within Baraka's formulation, for Baraka himself traced out a direct relation between his nationalist thought and Fanon, Cabral and Aimé Césaire's critical nationalist-socialist Thirdworldism/Tricontinentalism. Speaking of his conversion to nationalism and move to Harlem, Baraka writes in his autobiography:

The arrival uptown, Harlem, can only be summed up by the feelings jumping out of Césaire's *Return to My Native Land* or Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* or Cabral's *Return to the Source*. The middle-class intellectual, having outintegrated the most integrated, now plunges headlong back into what he perceives as blackest, native-est. Having dug, finally, how white he has become, now, classically, comes back to his countrymen charged up with the desire to be black, uphold black, etc. ... a fanatical patriot. (295)

The "blackness" of Baraka's imagination, then, is not a pure "singular ethnicity of African American existence" but the blackness of a transnational, anti-colonial community whose

embodied racial identity is also the trace of their oppression and marginalization. True, Baraka's nationalism is deeply informed by both Malcolm X and Maulana Karenga; but, as Baraka himself explains, his nationalism is also a consequence of his interlocution with transnational anti-colonial thinkers such as Fanon and Césaire. Critics who seek to read Baraka's nationalist period merely as an expression of a singular ethnic imagination fail to perceive the transnational composition of categories such as "black people" and "black experience." Indeed, the poet's association with third world radicalism predates his formal conversion to nationalism, shaping his poetic imagination and giving direction to his work. The spirit of colonial experience of the global south so deeply permeates his thematic structure that thematic exploration of colonial relations and racial oppression return as recurring themes in his late works as well, especially in his much discussed work "Somebody Blew up America," in which Baraka establishes a line of continuity between America's internal exploitation of its own population and its oppression of nations outside its geographical boundary.

Albeit central to Baraka's intellectual and poetic project, the idea of transnational radicalism has not been fully explored by his critics. The body of text analyzing his relevance in American literary tradition is certainly important, pertinent too. However, equally pertinent—if not more—are micropolitical readings exposing the gaps within Baraka's thought, bringing into attention his misogyny or homophobia, even his compromises and academic complicity. Although many of these readings do not take into account Baraka's evolution as an aesthete and a political being and show how Baraka attempted to come to terms with these limits in his later works, these interventions are nonetheless relevant for bringing into purview specific aesthetic and performative disjunctures within Baraka's literary output. However, what gets drowned out in micropolitical textual readings of the kind attempted by Michael Davidson and Jerry Gafio Watts is Baraka's own voice itself.

In his well-written reflection on Baraka's and the Black Arts movements' homophobic and acutely masculinist literary production, Michael Davidson explains how the works produced by Black Arts poets and writers exhibit a deep anxiety about homosexuality and feminization of male sexuality. Davidson argues that Baraka's relationship to homosexuality is more complex than that of many of his Black Arts comrades in that he shared both social and intellectual relation with the Beat poets—a group dominated by a number of prominent literary figures who were outspoken about their sexuality. At the beginning of the section in which he discusses Amiri Baraka's work he notes: "The gender politics of Amiri Baraka is a far more complex issue than that of Haki Madhubuti since the former has occupied multiple relationships both to white and black culture throughout his career" (136) thus suggesting that Baraka's outburst against the white male homosexual intellectual on the one hand and his violent rage against white middle class women and the Jew on the other is an outcome of both personal and political experiences which cannot be reduced to simple reductive reading of Baraka's anti-women, anti-homosexual and anti-Jew position.

In the tenth chapter of his voluminous work on Baraka, Jerry Gafio Watts seeks to critique Baraka's position on women during his nationalist phase. For Watts, Baraka's position on women during the Black Arts era is a simplistic tale of the nationalist patriarch's dismissal

of his female comrades and an expression of his misogyny. While Watts pays attention to Baraka's changing perception about women, his notion about Baraka does not change much even at the end of the section. His attempts to reconcile Baraka's misogynic nationalist period with his anti-sexist Marxian phase allow for a more confused view unable to forget the past and unwilling to fully embrace the present. His view is symptomatically present in the last paragraph of this chapter on Baraka's relation to femininity where he claims:

It would be more precise to say that Baraka abandoned a vehemently sexist, crude black nationalism for an antisexist, vulgar Marxism. Yet the memories of Baraka's sexism linger ... Regardless of the various arguments that Baraka now invokes to explain his vulgar sexism, the black community suffered at the hands of black activists who advocated the subservience of black women. (346-347)

In the next section, I will attempt to weigh in on Watts's claim about Baraka in relation to the poet's own reflections on his political and personal transformations, so we can understand better how the poet's understanding of the world changed over the years.

### **Baraka and Transnationalism**

The first sentence of Baraka's autobiography burdens the reader with the weight of travail and transformation almost in a counterintuitive way, explaining nothing yet expecting the reader to understand a change that had to come, that was inevitable. Yet, there is something mutual, something communal about this transformation that leaves his readers with no doubt that it was a mutual and collective change experienced not only by him and his wife but also a number of other African American writers of that generation. "The last writing of this stopped somewhere in 1974, when we had become Communists finally, Amina and I" (xi), writes Baraka on the first page of his autobiography. If we take his emphasis on the word "finally" literally, we realize how becoming a "Communist" was pivotal for him; he was, in his own account, always heading towards that direction. "The fact that I became a Communist is not startling to me," he writes, making apparent how his early days of cultural nationalism led him towards the later transformation. While it is more or less clear how this transformation led him to adopt a particular political line, dispersed as his reflections are, it is not easy to cognize how this political transformation catapults into a radical aesthetic transformation in his literary productions, especially in his poetry. To find a trace of this meaningful transformation one has to move to Chapter Seven of his autobiography where he begins to trace out the trajectory of a long and slow metamorphosis.

"The Cuban trip was a turning point of my life," he writes in Chapter Seven. The full import of his Cuban trip does not become visible until we come across the pivotal moment when he is hounded by Rubi Betancourt, Jamie Shelly and other young poets from different parts of Latin America and is forced to rethink his existence as an apolitical poet (244). Speaking of his experience in Cuba he writes: "But I carried so much back with me that I was never the same again. The dynamic of the revolution had touched me" (246). Indeed, the experience of having to account for his political stance and position on race had a far deeper implication in his life than he had thought of at that moment. Equally significant was his transaction with

other writers from Latin America whose experiences of struggle with imperialism and racial domination he had to listen to.

The echo of his transnational radicalism can be noticed in his long, three-part poem dedicated to Rubi Betancourt. Titled “Betancourt” and written on 30 July 1960 in Havana during his Cuba trip, this poem revisits his memories of Betancourt, a graduate student he met on the train. In his essay “Cuba Libre,” Baraka recalls meeting Betancourt in the following manner: “She was very short, very blond and very pretty, and had a weird accent that never ceased to fascinate me. For about thirty minutes we stood in the middle isle talking to each other” (*The LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka Reader* 146). The poem embodies the drama and the tension of the meeting between these two people in terms of sexualized and fetishistic images. The fragments capture the force of the desire. While the first part of the poem produces in fractured frames the images of their meeting near the seaside, where they are sitting against each other and are gradually advancing towards sexual contact, the second part revisits the same memory, speaking of their last night’s union. The exhaustion of lovemaking is captured through the image of “the cock/ flat/ on skin/ like/ a dead/ insect” (*Transbluesency* 39). There is a subtle insinuation of the union of the two opposing worlds in the second section:

And last night, talking to ourselves, except  
when some wildness  
cut us, ripped impossibly  
deep beneath black  
flesh  
to black bone. Then  
we loved each other. Understood  
the miles of dead air  
between our  
softest parts ... (39)

What we encounter in these lines is an internalization of the external. The fetishized body of the woman has been internalized through sexual contact. If we look at it closely, we will also notice how the intellectual encounter between the radical woman activist and the apolitical poet has been battered into a physical contact between the two. Yet, the significance of the union can hardly be ignored. The desire to unite with the other (Revolutionary-Mexican-blond-woman) certainly embodies Baraka’s desire to bridge the gap between him and the person who the poem is about—a revolutionary who wants him to join the community of poets/writers engaged in the task of resisting imperialism/capitalism. The thematic branching off from nationalism to the broader horizon of transnational struggle against imperialism and capitalism is what remains unique about Baraka. Very few other American poets have ventured out, as he has, to traverse the transnational, anti-imperialist thematic plain.

Within the Baraka oeuvre, “Betancourt” does stand in isolation. The theme of transnational struggle is also explored in a number of other poems, especially his long poem “Reggae or Not!” published in 1981. The title itself is suggestive of a transnational transaction through the

medium of music. What is also explored is the theme of collective resistance against capitalism and imperialism. Meant to be accompanied by reggae music, the final section of the poem blurts out the desire for a global proletarian unity and the rise of a Black Nation almost in the manner reggae chants are tossed up in the air. The alternative lines “Self Determination/ Revolution” is meant to work as leitmotif to be sung by a chorus. The repetitive lines are then followed up with a repetition of the thematic evocation of a transnational call for freedom and unity: “I be black angry communist/ I be part of rising black nation/ I be together with all fighters who fight imperialism ...” (*Transbluesency* 184). What is more or less evident in these articulations is that, by 1981, Baraka’s nationalism found its full expression in anti-capitalism, racial and ethnic equity and anti-imperialism. In other words, Baraka finally reached his political-ideological stasis in the 1980s through third world Marxism—a position he continued to strongly assert, both through his works and spoken words, until his death on January 9, 2014.

### **Baraka and the Revolutionary Aesthetics**

In her commendable work on comparative literature titled *Resistance Literature* (1987), Barbara Harlow proposes to read a host of Third World literary texts through Palestinian novelist and prose writer Ghassan Kanafani’s formulation of “resistance literature.” According to Harlow, Kanafani’s theorization of Palestinian literature allows for a much broader conceptualization of the idea; the same concept, she suggests, can be employed to frame literary works engaged in the task of challenging occupation and domination elsewhere. For instance, the same category can be employed to productively understand literary works produced from Asia, Africa, and South and Central America—works whose conscious ambition is to collapse the boundary between aesthetics and politics and employ literature in the task of whipping up resistance. Harlow thus draws on Ghassan Kanafani’s concept to distinguish between literary works produced in ordinary circumstances and works originating in politically charged historical moments, between literature as such and resistance literature. She does acknowledge the spatial/locational and historical uniqueness that inform Kanafani’s theorization: it is indeed the politically charged history of Palestine that gives impetus to his idealization of the Palestinian literature of his era as resistance literature. Nevertheless, Harlow also notes that despite its locational and historical limits, the Palestinian writer’s conceptual category can provide us with a powerful theoretical tool to come to terms with a whole array of Third World literary texts whose ideological premise coheres with the kind Kanafani finds in Palestinian writing of the 1970s. To put it plainly, Harlow notices within the dispersed field of Third World literature a broader homology and seeks to frame this difference as resistance literature because much of Third World literature is shaped by the experience of struggle against “western” imperialism. As Harlow puts it:

Ghassan Kanafani, in referring to Palestinian literature as “resistance literature,” is writing within a specific historical context, a context which may be most immediately situated within the contemporary national liberation struggles and resistance movements against Western imperialist domination of Africa, Central and South America, and the Middle and Far East. The very immediacy and specificity of the



historical context reveal, however, the broader role to be played by resistance literature in particular, but more generally too by what has come to be referred to as “Third World literature.” (4)

Behind Harlow’s attempt to conceptualize resistance literature as a specific category within literature in general lies an intent to cognitively apprehend the political content that separates Third World literature from that of the first world. Although similar attempts to theorize the political saturation of Third World literature have been made in other circumstances, notably Fredric Jameson in his insightful essay “Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism” in which he advances the idea that all third world literary texts can be read and conceptualized as allegories of the Third World’s struggle against capitalism and imperialism, Harlow’s deployment of the term “resistance literature” seeks to cast political struggle within the frame of conscious attempts to articulate an ideological position. Whereas Jameson’s categorization is more of an attempt to bring into purview the unconscious structures that permeate through the political content of literature, Harlow’s is to restore agency to those literary texts for which politics is a conscious attempt to assert an ideological preference. The question, therefore, is not so much of how the political unconscious shapes both the form and the content of literary works, but, rather, how, for particular authors, ideology becomes the primary conduit for mediating and expressing aesthetic concerns.

As to the question of whether or not it is possible to read Amiri Baraka’s poetry through Kanafani’s typology of resistance literature, we must be ready to stretch the theory of the Palestinian critic beyond his intended reach. Like many of the Third World poets, Baraka’s strength has been his ability to articulate the collective struggle of the black urban populace, thus giving voice not only to his own individual marginalization within the American society but also to many others who shared his experience. The deep tension between his predominantly hybrid Blues oriented improvisational form and distinctly anti-authoritarian content has led critics like Helen Vendler to conjecture that Baraka’s poetic form is indistinct and inferior. One of Vendler’s reservations against Baraka originates from her conviction that Baraka’s thematic content is not complemented by equally radical formal experimentations. When she claims, for instance, that “a theme is not enough to make a poem,” she is gesturing towards what she construes as Baraka’s formal superficiality. Unlike Robert Hayden—who, in my reckoning, is one of the most challenging and profound American poets of the twentieth century—Baraka’s soundscapes and stanzaic movements do not immediately strike one as carefully crafted motions; far from structured and schematized, Baraka’s poetry often follows erratic pace and cadence, as if searching for coherence in a world of chaos and confusion. The movement of the poet’s words and sounds, as Muyumba has brilliantly demonstrated in his book *The Shadow and the Act*, is that of free jazz—tentative and experimental yet distinctively African American. What Vendler is unable to take into consideration, however, is that the very nature of Baraka’s thematic content—articulation of the black urban struggle—makes it necessary for him to find a formal expression which lies outside the dominant forms which other poets of his generation found useful. Although she casually dismisses the innovativeness of Baraka’s short lines, it is in his short, broken lines that the musicality of his poetry gathers its distinctive

echo<sup>4</sup>; it is here that the spirit of urban free jazz meets its aesthetic counterpart, rural blues. The confluence of jazz and blues forms in Baraka's poetry does not merely shape the poet's formal expressions; it also symptomatically represents the dialectical tension between African and European formal structures mediating a manifestly rebellious thematic content.

An excellent example of Baraka's formal experimentation is "Wise I"—a deeply meditative poem written in short lines. The first poem of *Wise, Why's, Y's* (1995), "Wise I" delves deep inside the history of trans-Atlantic slave trade to recuperate the bafflement and trauma of being dragged into an alien land. The general theme of a traumatic return to the past—the visceral feeling of being trapped and humiliated, and not being able to fully comprehend the loss—echoes in the formal arrangement as well; the irregular stanzaic movement embodies the collective bafflement and incomprehensibility of the African diaspora in the eighteenth and the nineteenth century. The terminal crisis—the apex of entrapment—is arrested here through the metaphor of the banning of the "boom ba boom," an indistinct African musical instrument which metaphorically represents all musical instruments brought to America by the captured slaves. It is in the sophisticated arrangement and the repetition of the onomatopoeia, "boom ba boom," that the formal internalization of jazz is materialized. The lyricism as well as the simplicity of these lines is rarely matched. Baraka writes:

If you ever find  
 Yourself, some where  
 Lost and surrounded  
 by enemies  
 who won't let you  
 speak in your own language  
 who destroy your statues  
 & instruments, who ban  
 your omm bomm ba boom  
 then you are in trouble  
 deep trouble  
 they ban your  
 own boom ba boom  
 you in deep deep trouble  
  
 humph!  
  
 probably take you several hundred years  
 to get  
 out! (*Transbluesency* 219)

The colloquial diction stands on a meticulous improvisational structure. "Omm bomm ba boom" in line 9 gets improvised in line 13 after being replaced by "own boom ba boom" and the same improvisation also takes place in lines 10 and 14. Notwithstanding this experimentation with diction and structural improvisation, the most significant aspect of this poem is its rewriting of history which is explored not from individualistic meditation but from

the standpoint of its collective appearance.<sup>2</sup> It captures history in an abbreviated form—in its absolute conciseness—without losing sight of the specific sites in which struggle appears in its concrete forms: language, religion and culture all appear lost to North America bound slaves. An enemy, referred to in the third person, is one who not only takes away the language but also destroys statues and confiscates musical instruments. What is attempted here is not an apprehension of history in its specific and local form but the collective history imagined through the trope of the banned musical instrument. The economy of the final utterance exemplifies Baraka's ability to capture a vast canvas within the expanse of a short line: the recuperation process may take several hundred years.

### Conclusion

From his telegraphic call to "all black people" to his abbreviation of the history of slave trade in North America, Baraka remains acutely sensitive to the collective struggles and aspirations not only of those located in geographical proximity but also of those located at a distance. It is in this gesture that one finds an echo of the collective aesthetic resistance of major Third World writers in Baraka's work. One also notices, in his intent to turn poetry into a "weapon in the struggle of ideas," the willingness to employ works of art in the service of "class struggle" ("Art is a Weapon in the Struggle of Ideas"). Baraka's aesthetic production, thus, becomes the embodiment of the radical aesthetic perception he subscribes to. True, his location shapes the substance of his overall aesthetic experience: Amiri Baraka is unimaginable outside the geographical boundary of the United States. His experience as an African American in the racially divided nation features heavily in the thematic architecture of his poetry. Nevertheless, as his aesthetic trajectory spanning almost three decades amply exemplifies, to place him in the vicinity of other American poets whose aesthetic perceptions Baraka consciously challenges is to put him in a straitjacket he consciously seeks to pass up. Such aesthetic pigeonholing also undermines Baraka's conscious self-remaking since the 1960s which took him further and farther away from the dominant forms and themes of American literature.

Vendler's enumeration of Baraka's work thus repeats the two common fallacies of canonical criticism: metanormativization and totalization. She fails to locate within the radical African American poet's work traces of aesthetic innovations not because her normative standards fail to map aesthetic innovations but because she imposes on aesthetic normativization itself another scale—one that pretends to be universal but fails to perform as such. Although traces of formal as well as thematic outsidedness are clearly visible in Baraka's works, in her quick evaluation of the poet's work, Helen Vendler employs vectors that are not only Euro-American but also distinctively elitist, to some degree reactionary as well. In her efforts to dismiss Baraka on the grounds that his poetry does not measure up to the canonical works of "Twentieth-century American poetry," one is able to notice the deployment of a normative category that only partially captures the full gamut of the African American poet's work. It is not that Vendler is unaware of the peril of totalization. One of the finest living critics of poetry, Vendler is quietly aware of the dialectical vision that shapes not only good criticism but also good poetry. The antinomies of her dialectical vision express themselves through the figure of Yeats's meditative verse in which he imagines a poem to be "cold/ And passionate

as the dawn” (Vendler 22). Her critique of Baraka’s poem “Black Art” owes its spirit to the Yeatsian paradox that suggests a poem needs to be both “cold” and “passionate.” Between the demand she makes from Baraka’s poem—that it should be both cold and passionate—and what Baraka expects his own poem to be able to do—to be actional and concrete, to be able to engage in violence—lies a parallax gap. The Yeatsian normative category cannot be effectively applied to appraise a poem whose primary objective is to incite action. These two domains of expectations remain opposed to each other, forming two axes of the dialectical tension that does not get resolved here. Vendler elevates Yeat’s meditation on internal dialectic of poetry to a metatheory, applicable to all poems, all aesthetic visions. It is here that her metanormative vision attains its totalizing effect. By positing the Yeatsian category as a universal normative frame and by forcing on Baraka and other African American poets a homogeneous category—“American poetry”—she fails to live up to the dialectical promise opened up by Yeat’s poetic imagination. Helen Vendler’s reading of Baraka and twentieth-century African American poets thus exemplifies a quotidian normativization unable to enact true dialectical criticism.

I would like to conclude by repeating William J. Harris’s comments on Baraka. Reflecting on Baraka’s thematic and stylistic uniqueness that poses a serious challenge to the critic’s taste and understanding, Harris writes: “Baraka offers nothing so easy to take away. He is indigestible, or at least hard to digest. To come to terms with him—his in-your-face language, strong feelings, and radical ideas—is not easy; that is part of his greatness.” I am of the opinion that Harris’s conjecture on Baraka’s aesthetic relevance is perhaps more accurate. Baraka remains unique not because he is located outside the canon but because his fearless confrontational style and thematic content confront us directly, bluntly.

## Notes

1. Many critics and readers of Baraka’s works have written about the relation between music and Baraka’s poetry. Eminent playwright and poet Ntozake Shange highlights the lyricism of Baraka’s poetry claiming: “There is such lyricism in Amiri Baraka’s work that it makes one swoon” (486). Woodward writes in his book titled *A Nation within a Nation* that Baraka is a lyrical poet “whose work ... reveals a special gift of ‘emotive music’ with a passionate and incantatory beauty” (xi). Many Baraka critics fail to take account of his distinctively African American lyricism and deployment of music in poetry.
2. Kathy Lou Schultz’s essay “Amiri Baraka’s *Wise, Why’s, Y’s*: Lineages of the Afro-Modernist Epic” explores the theme of collectivization in Baraka’s *Wise Why’s Y’s* elaborately. In Schultz’s reckoning, the fundamental distinction between Baraka’s epic poem and those written by American modernists at the beginning of the twentieth century lies in the way nation has been imagined and treated in these epics. The thematic uniqueness of Baraka’s epic lies in the way he is able to represent the history of a “diasporic,” as well as “multi-racial” collective nation and identity.

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