Somebody Blew Off Baraka

You can’t help wondering what the New Jersey committee that picked Amiri Baraka as state poet laureate was thinking. ("New Jersey’s Poet Dilemma" A28)

His strengths outweighed some past reputation for being slightly outrageous. (Committee Chairwoman Judith Pinch, qtd. in Purdy, “Unrepentant” A30)

More than a few readers were surprised to learn that Amiri Baraka had been selected to follow Gerald Stern as the poet laureate of his home state; it is not often that the state so honors a poet who has, after all, advocated the demise of the capitalist state. Baraka has been widely quoted as having warned New Jersey Governor James E. McGreevey that the Governor would “catch a lot of hell for this” (Purdy, “Unrepentant” A30). Baraka was soon proved right, though the Governor quickly proved himself less willing to catch hell in defense of First Amendment freedom than he had initially indicated. (The New York Times, while doubting the judgment of the committee that selected Baraka for the Laureateship, did at least argue that the position that Baraka’s poetry “should be a reason to fire or silence him is in itself offensive” ["New Jersey’s Poet Dilemma" A28].) In the proclamation appointing Baraka Laureate, McGreevey referenced William Carlos Williams’s memorable lines: “It is difficult / to get the news from poems” (qtd. in Santora B3). Williams, of course, never served as Poet Laureate of New Jersey or of the United States. He was named by a selection committee to serve as Poetry Consultant to the Library of Congress in the early years before that post had been transformed to a laureateship, but he was never able to assume the office. At the height of the anticommunist hysteria at mid-century, Williams’s nomination was held up because of his suspect past relationship to such radical journals as The Masses and others. The official government position was that Williams was unable to serve due to his worsening health. In fact, right-wing opposition was organized to assure that he would not serve. Given that one New Jersey poet had been so ignominiously treated simply for having published on the same pages as communists, it seemed a measure of some growth that New Jersey would honor a poet who was in fact a communist.

This makes Williams a more than usually appropriate, and ironic, source for citation in the body of Governor McGreevey’s proclamation. That such ironies were not more remarked on at the occasion of Baraka’s honor is not terribly surprising. This history appears to have been lost to the ravages of our media’s short-term memory. A writer for the Yale News, revealing something at
least of the crisis in standards at our nation’s more prestigious institutions of higher learning, stated matter-of-factly that the post of New Jersey Poet Laureate had been held previously by Walt Whitman, Allen Ginsberg, and William Carlos Williams (Adrangi), this despite the fact that the post was not created till 1999. It is just possible that this howler was the result of the Yale writer’s having misread a remark made in Matthew Purdy’s New York Times column of September 29, 2002, reporting the latest Baraka controversy. Purdy commented that the recent standoff “between governor and poet is surprising in a state with a poetic tradition that includes Walt Whitman, William Carlos Williams, Allen Ginsberg and a Turnpike rest stop named for Joyce Kilmer.” Purdy manages in one sentence to overlook the earlier Williams controversy, Whitman’s loss of a government position due to his writing, and Ginsberg’s Howl trial. The wonder wasn’t that the home state of Whitman, Williams, and Ginsberg had produced yet another rift between poet and government, but rather that no scandal had yet attached itself to the Joyce Kilmer Rest Stop. But such failures of memory and reading seem symptomatic of the most recent Baraka controversies. Amidst the many charges of anti-Semitism leveled against the poet’s performance of “Somebody Blew Up America,” few bothered to read as far as these lines:

Who put the Jews in ovens,
who helped them do it
Who said “America First”
and OK’d the yellow stars

Fewer still noted the rhetorical similarity the poems bears to such avant-garde precursors as Kenneth Rexroth’s “Thou Shalt Not Kill.” And none among those gathered to denounce Baraka seemed to have noticed a line on the first page of the poem that reads: “They say (who say? Who do the saying . . .).” The fact that the anaphoric structure of the poem with its interrogating litany of Who’s begins by raising the question of the status of the utterance, by throwing into question the political and rhetorical ground on which the saying takes place, would seemingly make more difficult some of the charges that have been leveled against the poem, but that would require an actual reading of the poem.

I want to pour gasoline down your chimneys.
I want to blow up your galleries.
I want to burn down your editorial offices.
I want to slit the bellies of your frigid women.
I want to sink your sailboats and launches.
I want to strangle your children at their fingerpaintings. (Rexroth 274)

This is not a passage from Baraka’s cultural nationalist period; it is a poem written as a memorial to Dylan Thomas by Kenneth Rexroth. While it is certainly the case that Rexroth spent his entire career as a political and artistic outsider (not much chance of a laureateship for him), nobody accused the author of this poem of supporting terrorism; nobody at the New York Times or the Yale News felt compelled to denounce the poet or to question the motives of those who might invite him to do a reading; and it doesn’t appear that anyone felt the closing lines of the poem to be a direct threat: “You killed him. / In your God damned Brooks Brothers suit, / You son of a bitch” (275). No doubt Brooks Brothers would rather not find themselves invoked in a poem in just this fashion, but they brought no legal actions against the poet. Nobody dug this verse out and pointed to it as a reason that the University of California at Santa Barbara should remove the aging Rexroth from its faculty as a clear and present danger to the youthful minds of students. In fact, Rexroth’s lyric explosion is directed at the same socio-political forces Baraka points to with his repeated “Who.” Rexroth writes:

They are killing the young men.
They know ten thousand ways to kill them.
Every year they invent new ones.
In the jungles of Africa,
In the marshes of Asia,  
In the deserts of Asia,  
In the slave pens of Siberia,  
In the slums of Europe . . . (267)

In Baraka's rhetoric, the same "they" is answer to his "who?"
Who killed the most niggers  
Who killed the most Jews  
Who killed the most Italians  
Who killed the most Irish  
Who killed the most Africans  
Who killed the most Japanese  
Who killed the most Latinos  
Who/Who/Who

Again, the assaults upon Baraka have tended to take no notice of these lines, lines that clearly argue against the charge of anti-Semitism brought against the passages that reference the terrorist assaults of September 11, 2001. But one does wonder why these bizarre lines—"Who told 4000 Israeli workers at the Twin Towers / to stay home that day"—whether anti-Semitic on not, are in the poem. Whether one chooses to believe, as Baraka apparently does, that government officials had reason to expect such an attack, the fact remains that there never were 4000 Israelis working at the Twin Towers. What was in Baraka's mind?

Neither do those attacks on Baraka note the eerie way in which Baraka's repeated interrogative provides a critical riposte to a repeated syllable of earlier modernist poetic racisms. In her striking essay "'HOO, HOO, HOO': Some Episodes in the Construction of Modern Male Whiteness," Rachel Blau DuPlessis has anatomized this seemingly "meaningless sound or inarticulate syllable" as it is repeated in the works of Vachel Lindsay, Wallace Stevens, and T.S. Eliot and the way that this phoneme comes to present "a cornucopia of racialized materials in order to create a powerful position for [male] whiteness" (81). As Baraka might ask, "Who do the saying?"

While Baraka had performed his poem "Somebody Blew Up America" at many venues in the months following its composition (and prior to his appointment as Laureate), sometimes occasioning local controversies, it was only following his reading of the poem at the well-publicized Geraldine R. Dodge Poetry Festival that he came under attack by The Jewish Standard and the Anti-Defamation League, which denounced Baraka's poem as "anti-Semitic" (qtd. in Purdy, "New Jersey" A15). This charge, as Baraka has pointed out in his defense, clearly collapses the state of Israel together with Jewishness, despite the fact that the poem patently does not. Some of Baraka's antagonists appear to recognize that there is a problem with this approach, but their circular reasoning ends by erasing all such distinctions. James Kirchick, for one, writing in the Yale News, says that "no serious defender of Israel ever claims that criticism of the Israeli government is inherently or automatically anti-semitic" but then proceeds, as if automatically, to assert that the offending portion of Baraka's poem "is more than just an expression 'critical of the Israeli government.' It is a vicious, anti-Semitic lie . . ." (2). The fact is that defenders of the state of Israel frequently argue that Israel's Arab population are citizens of the Middle East's only real democracy, with rights of representation in the government and full citizenship (though, to judge by the Law of Return, not so full as others). If it is the case that Israel is a democracy with Arabic citizens, then it cannot be the case that attacks upon the government of Israel are automatically attacks upon Jews, nor could it even be the case that a lie about Israel is inherently anti-Semitic. But again, the tortured logic that has been brought to bear on this poem is the logic of those unwilling to read. One looks in vain in these published accounts for even the most cursory knowledge of Baraka's Autobiography, let alone for any signs of awareness of his own stinging critique of his earlier cultural nationalist positions. We have included "Somebody Blew Up America" in its entirety in this issue so that readers can make up their own minds about it.
This latest “Baraka affair” has been characterized by ahistorical and decontextualized illogic. The sorry state of the debate is perhaps best seen in a curious column contributed by Tim Rutten to the Los Angeles Times. Rutten, a media critic for the Times, writes in the wake of revelations regarding California’s recently appointed Poet Laureate, Quincy Troupe, who had falsely claimed a university degree he did not have when he submitted his résumé to the selection committee (as, indeed, he had done when he submitted his successful application to the University of California at San Diego). Though the Troupe and Baraka controversies quite plainly have nothing to do with one another, Rutten’s approach is to use one black poet to beat up on another. In comparing the Troupe and Baraka situations, the columnist comes to the odd conclusion that Troupe is somehow the more honorable. Rutten observes that Troupe “resigned—voluntarily and at his own initiative” (E1), though in the very next phrase Rutten makes it clear that Troupe only initiated his resignation after others had discovered his deception. Rutten goes on to quote Troupe as saying, “I’m not blaming anybody—not the Senate Rules Committee, nor the governor’s office” (E7). It was not the state Senate or the Governor who had created the false résumé, so it’s not at all evident why Rutten finds it significant that Troupe doesn’t blame others for his own actions. For Rutten, Baraka “is another matter entirely” (E1). It is difficult to know what to make of Rutten’s reasoning here. Whatever his many fine accomplishments as an artist and whatever his contributions to the cultural life of California, the fact remains that Quincy Troupe committed an act of fraud when he secured his rather enviable position and salary at the prestigious University of California, and compounded that fraud in securing an appointment as Poet Laureate. Truly the great tragedy of this scandal is that Troupe’s considerable works and generous support of the arts in California and nationally are now shadowed by this serial fraud that, even Rutten acknowledges, stretched over three decades. The problem with Baraka is not that he lied, but that he was completely open in his expression of his beliefs. For Rutten, “There is a good case to be made that the people who ought to resign are those who named” Baraka to the Laureate’s position (E7).

Little of this can come as any great surprise to Amiri Baraka. He is a poet who has heard his own poetry read back to him by a sentencing judge as evidence that he is a dangerous man who should be put away. He is a poet who has been arrested and brought before a grand jury purely for the content of his publications. He is perhaps the only poet of his stature and importance to the history of American art who even now is not represented by a Collected Poems volume. It comes as little surprise, but it should surprise all of us. It is the hope of the editors of this collection that a renewed and more substantive discussion of Baraka’s works may now be underway. We hope the new Baraka scholarship will move beyond his perpetual controversies—after all, he has specialized in controversy for the past forty years—and discover his real achievements.

It was just such an effort that first suggested this project. Several of the contributors were brought together for a 60th Birthday retrospective consideration of Baraka held at the Schomburg Library. Typically, a 60th Birthday conference couldn’t be mounted till Baraka had turned 61. Under the able guidance of Kalamu ya Salaam, Ethelbert Miller, and the staff of the Schomburg, critics, poets, and friends spent two days illuminating Baraka’s work in poetry, fiction, and music criticism. A
second Baraka retrospective was held at Howard University, bringing together many of the same contributors, along with others who had not been able to attend the Schomburg event. It was in the wake of these two conferences that Kalamu ya Salaam first began the work of creating this special issue, later joined by William J. Harris and Aldon Lynn Nielsen. This has not been an effort to achieve encyclopedic coverage of Baraka’s output; that ambitious project must await the compiling of, well, ... a Baraka encyclopedia. Nonetheless, it is the editors’ hope that the scope of criticism and analysis here offered is truly occasion for hope, hope that actual reading of Baraka may outweigh the column inches recently devoted to blowing him off.


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