

The Personalities Who Inspired LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka:

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Amiri Baraka almost single-handedly changed both the nature and the form of post- World War II Afro-American literature. Biographer Arnold Rampersad places Baraka alongside Phyllis Wheatley, Frederick Douglass, Paul Laurence Dunbar, Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Richard Wright, and Ralph Ellison as one of the eight figures who have significantly affected the course of African American literary culture. He is a singular lyrical poet whose work reveals a special gift of emotive music with a passionate and incantatory beauty. Baraka's work is concerned with the sounds of black life and that probably more than any other writer, Baraka captures the idiom and style of modern urban black life. In his writing and drama Amiri Baraka's personal yearning for individuality and meaning captured the imagination of a generation of African Americans because to varying degrees that group was experiencing similar tensions between moods ranging from spiritual ennui, personal malaise, and identity crisis on the one hand to racial kingship, black consciousness, and cultural regeneration on the other. However we must remember that there are no engineers but only bricoleurs. In this case Amiri Baraka, previously LeRoi Jones was influenced by a number of people. He was highly inspired by reading Garcia Lorca's "Gypsy Ballads"¹, which was translated by Langston Hughes. Apart from Langston Hughes the key people to have influenced Amiri Baraka were Allen Ginsberg, Malcolm X, Robert Williams and a particular episode in his life where he had the opportunity to travel to Cuba and meet Fidel Castro and Ernesto Che Guevara. With this as the context, I have discussed how Ginsberg, Malcolm X, Robert Williams, Langston Hughes and Askia Toure were important personalities who gave the ammunition to Baraka to distort the language of the Afro-American people. "Those artists", Amiri Baraka said later in his essay Revolutionary Art,

“who say their art has nothing to do with politics or society, are simply retarded or winking at their own seduction as state and corporate prostitutes.” (Harris 137)

Allen Ginsberg:

“I thought the book *Howl* was something special”- Baraka (Autobiography 150)“I had read about Allen Ginsberg in a newspaper in Puerto Rico when the paper *The Village Voice* came out...and I read about this *Howl* and you know they were banning the book, you know for these words...and the police wanted to lock him up, I decided I have to meet this guy as he must be doing something right.”² Allen Ginsberg’s *Howl*, which had sent shock waves in the Anglo-Saxon literary canon played a major part in influencing poet Amiri Baraka who was then named LeRoi Jones. It was this poem that had developed a curiosity in the mind of Baraka who went on to join the Greenwich Village and shaped his career as a poet. Although Baraka was not a fully-fledged political activist at that time he was immediately attracted by the news of a poem which was being banned the repressive state apparatus of the state. The reasons for this particular interest can well be explained in two similar events which he had experienced in his life. He was “kicked out”³, both from his college and Air-force service which had created a sense of anguish in his life. Incidents like these can create a kind of a creative outburst as it strengthens the will to prove oneself especially when one has been marginalised:

And finally, 1957, they booted me out of the service as undesirable, you bet, I had already got booted out from college as likewise, but now as a fucking commie Buddhist coloured guy, busted for books and an alarming hostility to dumbness. You ever dig Curtis Le May on his stomach on a go-cart speeding across the flight line Saturday mornings. Wd instruct the hell out of you. With both stripes now ripped off along with secret clearance, Gone, Gone, and so we shot off in ecstasy to the City, the Apple, New York, Bohemia, The Village, to try out our vicious learning on those we were sure wd dig how heavy we had got. And it was *Howl* again. (Razor 235)

This particular poem was in itself a kind of a tower of ammunition which bombarded notions of a particular code of poetic language. Baraka’s influence on Allen Ginsberg can be seen in his essay *Allen Ginsberg: Bless His Soul* where he writes: So HOWL- the language. The stance. The sense of someone being in the same world, the defiance. Yeh- to the dead and to somebody else’s version of Bohemian Intellegentsia there was here this HOWL So I wrote Allen on a piece of toilet paper to Git Le Couer asking was

he “for real”. He answered on French toilet paper, which is better for writing, that he was tired of being Allen Ginsberg. And sent a broad registration of poetry from a newly rising objective united front of young and younger poets, for the new magazine YUGEN. And that began some forty years of hook up.

Allen was finally what I thought was everywhere in the Village, a genuine book stuffed intellectual, and as well, a publicist, perhaps the best we knew of poetry itself. There were so many bullshitters and tasters and energetic dilettantes otherwise. Jammed in the coffee shops imitating Marlon Brando. Except Jack Micheline wasn’t imitating, in those jazz poetry sessions he was who Marlon Brando was imitating. And we remained friends Allen and I for forty years. His takes on Williams, and the variable foot, American speech, the breath phrase, the existence of an American language and literature, which the colleges still deny, was what was most important to me. The anti-Moloch heavy anti-imperialist line that wove through HOWL. AMERICA GO FUCK YR SELF WITH YR ATOM BOMB!! Now that was poetry!

Plus talking to Allen about Western poetry was always part of a course...Allen was a font of ideas and publicity for the new word, a new generation, on prosody, America and intros to the whole united front against dead people “they don’t like the way we live” was the Beats...(Ibid 236)

Even in his autobiography Baraka says that he thought the book *Howl* was something special. He wrote that it was a breakthrough for him. He now knew poetry could be about some things that he was familiar with. That it did not have to be about suburban birdbaths and Greek mythology. He kept watch for more Ginsberg poems.

According to Baraka, unlike the cold edges and exclusiveness of the New Yorker poem that had made him cry, Ginsberg talked of a different world, one much closer to his own. There is also a personal reason which made him get attracted to the poetry of Ginsberg:

Allen Ginsberg’s *Howl* was the first thing to open my nose, as opposed to, say, instructions I was given, directions, guidance. I dug *Howl* myself, in fact many of the people I’d known at the time warned me off it and thought further because I was looking for something. I was precisely open to its force as the statement of a new generation. As a line of demarcation from the “silent generation” and the man with the (yellow) grey flannel skin, half-brother of the one with the grey flannel suit. I took up with the Beats because that’s what i saw taking

off and flying and somewhat resembling myself. The open and implied rebellion- of form and content. Aesthetic as well as social and political. But I saw most of it as Art, and the social statement as merely our lives as dropouts from the mainstream. (Autobiography 156)

Malcolm X:

“Malcolm’s murder shot me out of the village for good, and our greetings and meeting became measured and less frequent. The gap between Black Nationalism and Tibetan Buddhism, I wanted to make war, Allen to make peace. For all our endless contention, often loud and accompanied by contrasting histrionics, we remained, in many ways, comrades in and of the word, partisans of consciousness!”- Amiri Baraka (Razor 236)

This exclamation is enough to point out how much of an influence Malcolm X had on the lives of many African-Americans including Amiri Baraka who was then known as LeRoi Jones. The assassination of Malcolm X on February 21, 1965, represented a critical turning point in the life of Baraka. He left his wife and children in Greenwich Village in order to join the Black Revolution. Further in his identity transformation, Hajj Jeesham Jaaber, the Islamic Priest who buried Malcolm X, renamed LeRoi Jones- Ameer Barakat, making it Amiri Baraka in Swahili, and gave Baraka the distinctive title “Imamu”, meaning spiritual leader.

Amiri Baraka explains:

Sylvia was named Amina (faithful) after one of Muhammad’s wives. Later, under Karenga’s influence, I changed my name to Amiri, Bantuizing or Swahilizing the first name and the pronunciation of the last name as well. Barakat in Arabic is pronounced “Body-cot”, the Swahili drops the “t” and accents the next... syllable, hence Baraka. Amiri with the rolled “r” is pronounced “Amidi”. (Woodard 59)

It was Malcolm X who had said that the entire history of the black people in America had been erased by the white people so much so that the Black people were not even aware of their own names. Malcolm X had said that if any black man on the soil of America thinks that their name ends with Jones or Johnson or Jackson, it is not the name of the black man in question but it was the name which the slaves inherited from their white masters. Baraka in his *A Poem for Black Hearts* writes:

For Malcolm’s eyes, when they broke the face of some dumb white man, For Malcolm’s hands raised to bless us all black and strong in his image of ourselves, For Malcolm’s words fire darts, the victor’s tireless thrusts, words hung above the world change as it may, he said it, and for this he was killed, for saying and feeling, and being/ change, all collected hot in his

heart, For Malcolm's heart, raising us above our filthy cities, for his stride, and his beat, and his address to the grey monsters of the world, For Malcolm's pleas for your dignity, black men, for your life, black man, for the filling of your minds with righteousness, For all of him dead and gone and vanished from us, and all of him which clings to our speech black god of our time...For great Malcolm a prince of the

Earth, let nothing in us rest until we avenge ourselves for his death, stupid animals that killed him, let us never breathe a pure breath if we fail, and white men call us faggots till the end of the earth. (Harris 218)

This shows us the emotions attached to the assassination of Malcolm X. Baraka in an interview⁴ says that after Martin Luther King's house was bombed many black people had rushed to the latter's home and asked him "what shall we do DR. King"⁵ to which he had answered that if any blood be shared let it be that of the black people. It was then that Malcolm X had appeared and had said that one should treat people like they get treated by others. If one is treated with respect, one should reciprocate in the language of respect and if one is treated with violence, one should return the favour. Malcolm X had also criticised some of the Black people who could see themselves as Americans only from the angle of the white man by accusing them to be Uncle Toms. In a way Malcolm X was accusing people with Black skins to wear white masks. Baraka notes in his essay *The Legacy of Malcolm X, and the coming of the Black Nation* that Malcolm X had been killed because he was dangerous to America. He was killed because he wanted to become an official or a statesman. During the late fifty's and the first five years of the sixty's Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Junior were two gigantic pillars leading the blacks to speak a language of their emancipation. Both were upholding a struggle but the quality of it was very different. While Martin Luther King Jr. adopted non-violent ways of protest, Malcolm X seemed to laugh at the very idea of co-operation with those people who were responsible for bringing the black people by force, from Africa and then converting them into slaves or private property, thereby erasing the entire history of these people. While Martin Luther King dreamt about his children living in a country where they would not be judged by the colour of their skin but the consent of their character, Malcolm X, who had embraced the religion of Islam after being inspired by the teachings of "honourable Elijah Muhammad", believed in a policy of retaliation if attacked by the white community. He was often met with criticisms of advocating violent measures but Malcolm X countered those criticisms by saying that, if the

“Nation of Islam” was being criticised for violence, it can be compared to the victimisation of the victim. Self-defence was instinctual and that is what Malcolm X stood for. This pillar of strength was embraced by Amiri Baraka who in his autobiography clearly states that he rejected Martin Luther King’s doctrine of non-violence:

I rejected Martin Luther King’s philosophy. I was not nonviolent. I had written a poem about his time that ended:

We have awaited the coming of a natural
Phenomenon. Mystics and romantics, knowledgeable
Workers
Of the land.
But none has come.
(Repeat)
But none has come.
Will the machine gunners please step forward?

I knew I rejected King’s tactics. (Autobiography 161)

Baraka further notes that Malcolm X wanted to give the national consciousness its political embodiment and send it out to influence the newly forming third world in which this consciousness was to be included. The concept of blackness, the concept of the National Consciousness, the proposal of a political form for this aggregate of Black Spirit are the things which were given to the black people by Garvey, through Elijah Muhammad and finally given motion into still another area of Black response by Malcolm X. Malcolm’s legacy to Black People is what he moved toward, as the accretion of his own spiritual learning and the movement of Black People in general, through the natural hope, a rise to social understanding within the new context of the white nation and its decline under hypocrisy and natural oppositeness which has pushed all of us toward new ideas.

From these points, it is evident that like many other black revolutionaries of that era, Baraka attempted to follow the path outlined by Malcolm X, the most popular themes were those of self-determination, self-respect, and self-defence. For Baraka, Malcolm X embodied the black ethos and the new man produced by revolutionary black consciousness. He sought to flesh out the principles of the new nationalism in several

of the most challenging lessons of Malcolm X: the urgency of the modernisation of black nationalism, the priority of black cultural revolution, the centrality of the African Revolution, and the necessity of developing a black ideology of self-determination, one reflecting the African American ethos. Komozi Woodard in his book *A Nation within a Nation: Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) & Black Power Politics* notes that Malcolm X was immensely interested in the use of mass media for Black Nationality formation, particularly television, radio, and newspapers; he personally initiated the *Muhammad Speaks* newspaper to spread the Nation of Islam movement. Moreover, Malcolm X was the bridge between the old nationalism and the new, developing a secular nationalism in tune with many of the innovations of the civil rights revolution. His agitational slogan *-the Ballot or the Bullet*, supported the voting rights of African Americans at a time when the old black nationalism rejected the American franchise.

The impact of the New Nationalism on Baraka and the younger writers and artists was quite dramatic. By building a bridge between the old nationalism and the new, Malcolm X helped lay the basis in political culture for a black united front of various classes and social groups that would bond together in the Modern Black Convention Movement. Under his sway the urban black poor were not isolated; instead of middle-class reformers on a mission in the ghetto, the poor would have allies in their struggle for dignity and justice. There was an outpouring of expression by artists and writers about the meaning of Malcolm X, the most definitive symbol of the Black Revolution. Along with Ossie Davis' bold eulogy "Our Shining Black Prince", Amiri Baraka's poem *A Poem for Black Hearts* which has been given above, expressed the combination of adoration, rage, and guilt that fired the minds of his generation. Baraka's interpretation of Malcolm X's behest did not end with a poem. On February 22, 1965, Baraka held a press conference to announce plans to establish the Black Arts Repertory Theatre/ School (BARTS) in Harlem. At that point a site had not been chosen, but Baraka explained that the school would offer "both practical and theoretical" schooling in all areas of drama: "Acting, writing, directing, set designing, production, and management". While the program was particularly aimed at black youth, the Black Arts also wished to provide a place for professional artists to perform.

Robert Williams:

Baraka had said, “It was Robert Williams, before Malcolm, who had openly expressed and brought to the world’s attention, and particularly the Black masses that the time had passed for passively accepting the assault of the Klan or any other hostile force” (Harris 524)

Even before Malcolm X, Robert Williams with his slogan “black people should meet violence with violence” had caused a stir around the world where the marginalised, especially the Black masses of America were getting used to the constant victimisation they underwent either through the Jim Crow Laws, or the infamous Ku Klux Klan, who were using the myth (superiority of the white race) as an ideology to violently abuse the coloured masses. In Baraka’s essay *Robert Williams: An Introduction*, we get clear evidence of how much an inspiration, Robert Williams was to Baraka. Robert Williams is little known due to his banishment from the National Association for the Advancement of coloured people (NAACP). It was Roy “Knees” Wilkins who had immediately dismissed Williams after the latter’s “meet violence with violence” slogan, which in essence was the continuation of the traitorous work in which he collaborated, with the expulsion of DuBois from the NAACP. Let us have a look at some parts of the essay which talks about this charismatic ex-marine who returned from the Korean War to Monroe, North Carolina where he became a central figure in the transformation of great sectors of what was the Civil Rights movement into the more brilliant Black Liberation Movement:

Williams openly preached and practiced Self-Defense, beginning with the infamous “Kissing Case”, which exploded when North Carolina racists jailed a 10 year old Black boy for allegedly kissing a 12 year old white girl. Drawing national attention to this case and summoning national legal support, including Conrad Lynn, Williams went on to lead his branch of the NAACP to execute SIT INS at the local library, where Blacks were refused Library Cards, SWIM INS at the local pool, since Black people were denied access. And the local KKK, ambushing them, taking off their hoods and taking their arms away from them. (Ibid 523)

In the same essay Baraka gives us a detailed account of Williams when he says that the Robert Williams went on to become the international chair of the African People’s Party, in exile, falsely accused of “kidnapping” two elderly white people, when it was Williams who saved their lives during a shootout between community

foes and the same Klan forces thinly disguised as North Carolina State Police. During his exile Williams travelled to China and lived in New Cuba where Baraka had met him. On the occasion of the celebration of the first anniversary of the Cuban Revolution it was Baraka and Williams who travelled together to Oriente province, where the victorious Fidelistas first landed aboard the Granma, as they began their ultimate overthrow of the corrupt U.S. stooge Batista regime. It was during this travel that an interesting thing happened which can be said to shape up his literary style as well. Williams had marched into the U.S. embassy, directly into the ambassador's office with a gun in his hand and demanded very forcefully to call Washington immediately, to send the federal Marshal to Monroe, to stop the Klan assault on his family. When someone observes an incident like this it gets imprinted on one's mind and it is this impression which reflects itself on the literary-artistic achievements.

Askia Toure:

Baraka's essay *Askia Toure: My Brother, The Revolutionary Artist*, shows us that the latter was also one important personality that had shaped up Baraka's revolutionary stance. This is what Baraka says in the short essay on Askia Toure:

I've written this before, in my partial Autobiography and in the brief exposition on The Black Arts Movement.

As a matter of fact, just recently in Chicago, where some folks projected a Black Literary Hall of Fame, I said these same things, though unfortunately there, and among people who should know better, I said them as a somewhat acid footnote on the somewhat skewed program and "enstoolment" that was going on.

Of the many poets, writers, cultural workers, artists and c., I know and have known, Askia Toure is, in my experience, one of the most consistent and openly revolutionary democratic artist-activists I know. This is so important these days, because all over the place, small things crawl out of smaller holes whimpering distorted half prevarications about the world, Black people, politics, art and whatever there is that can be lied about...That's why we should value this brother and revolutionary comrade, Askia Toure, because no matter the sell outs, betrayals, newly outfitted house slaves, neo-con traitor coons, Negro skin merchants posing as "non-political" straight men for the Beast (Askia's favourite word, right out the Bible)...Askia has remained true to the deepest principles of the Black Liberation and Revolutionary Democratic Movement, that we destroy our own National Oppression and with that, imperialism itself...And for this, he, like many of us, has had to take the hit, ie., to be

dissed and covered, passed over, character assassinated and lied about, dismissed as an artist, demeaned as an intellectual, deprived of all but barest means of survival. WHY? Because, like too few of us artists, as we bent and were bent to harvest other peoples' profits we had to become our own prophets. (Razor 420)

Langston Hughes:

Amiri Baraka was perhaps most influenced by Langston Hughes, but the latter achieved the process of shattering rules about how black experience could be depicted, much earlier by embedding his images in Afro- American history and culture, in the ground in which they belonged. The black world recreated by Langston Hughes brings the black past into the present. That depicted by Baraka originates both in present black culture and in white, and constitutes a genuinely new black language and a new black imaginative world.

In his 1926 literary manifesto "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain", Hughes asserted that choosing the life of black folk as subject for his art was also a way of choosing himself- a way of possessing himself through the rhythms and traditions of black people. In creating black theatre, and particularly in creating a black dramatic landscape, Hughes also constructed a place in which to situate himself as artist, a context from which he could speak about what interested him to those he wished to address. Hughes's response to the problem and achievements had not yet received accurate representation beyond that conceived by Richardson or Edmonds. "Representation" does not mean, for Hughes, only plays about black people that mimetically suggest their lives. The forms through which they articulate their experience must also be represented. The people are not merely be spoken about, they must speak. Hughes was sensitive to who was speaking in all artistic forms- a question the dominant culture often takes for granted when responding to artistic expression. While Richardson and Edmonds had the same uneasiness about who was speaking, they felt compelled to speak in a way acceptable to the dominant culture in order to gain a hearing. Hughes insisted that he be met on his own terms and on his own turf, both by his white audience and by those members of his black audience who expressed discomfort with his art.

Hughes explored the gamut of appropriate ways to let the voices of his people be heard. The content and language of Cora's speech achieves the kind of lyricism that grows from the black tradition. But the soliloquy form is not indigenous to it. This tension between voice and form occurs in all his conventional plays. In the chronicle and

gospel plays, however, Hughes discovered uses of the theatre that permitted folk forms full expression.

Sanders notes in her book *The Development of Black Theatre in America:*

From shadows to selves that Hughes understood completely the difficulties confronting black theatre as it emerged from a hostile, racist stage tradition and his resolution of those difficulties is gentle. He prefers to conquer the stage by eliciting assent from his white audience rather than by threatening it. Moreover, he provides it with a rich experience of black culture. Hughes's legacy to black theatre was finally what he intended. He brought to the stage figures from the black experience that had been stolen and abused by white artists in a racist stage tradition. His work was ultimately that of rehabilitating the stage for black audiences, completing the work Richardson and Edmonds had begun. His unselfconscious display of every aspect of black folk expression created a vital black stage reality. The characters he depicted were ultimately benign. With LeRoi Jones, a new black character entered the stage. His presence forever altered the American imaginative perception of the black experience.

Footnotes

- 1- From an interview with poet E. Ethelbert Miller representing Howard Poetry and Literature Society titled “The Writing Life” in http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SHG60P2ECNk&feature=youtube_gdata_player
 - 2- From an interview conducted by Southern Human Rights Organiser’s Network in- <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NsPf1hKEAhY>
 - 3- Ibid.
 - 4- From an interview conducted by Vision Point Media Group in <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qkhL70D2ZBO>
 - 5- Ibid.
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