

# Amiri Baraka

in conversation with Paweł Jędrzejko

## Still a Revolutionary . . .

The conversation below is a follow-up to Christopher Bigsby's interview with Amiri Baraka, published in *Theatre Quarterly* three decades ago, in 1978. It was recorded in the artist's backstage room in Katowice, Poland, immediately after a moving performance of the Amiri Baraka Speech Quartet in the Hipnoza Jazz Club in Katowice, during the 'Ars Cameralis Silesiae Superioris' Festival in 2009. The interlocutors were accompanied by a leading jazz pianist, Dave Burrell, and an excellent double bass player, William Parker. The interview, originally carried out for the *Er(r)go: Journal of Theory, Culture and Literary Studies*, was possible thanks to the help and encouragement of one of the most inspiring Polish contemporary poets, Bartek Majzel, an unswerving propagator of culture in Silesia and throughout Poland. Paweł Jędrzejko is an Assistant Professor at the University of Silesia in Katowice. He is the author of *Liquidity and Existence: the Experience of the Land and the Sea in Herman Melville's Thought* (Sosnowiec-Katowice-Zabrze: BananaArt.PI/ExMachina/MStudio, 2008). He is also a co-founder and co-editor of the *Review of International American Studies* and regularly works with *Er(r)go Quarterly*.

ON 21 NOVEMBER 2009, at the invitation of the organizers of the 'Ars Cameralis Silesiae Superioris' Festival, a unique guest mesmerized the audience of the Hipnoza Jazz Club in Katowice – an artist both admired and anathematized, an icon of revolutionary activism, and a major contributor to the birth of the new aesthetics of American theatre; an initiator of the Black Arts movement and author of forty-odd books, including collections of essays, volumes of poetry, plays, and literary and music criticism – Amiri Baraka.

Born in 1934 in Newark, New Jersey, as Everett LeRoy Jones, Amiri Baraka has been evoking strong emotions since his first publications saw the light of day. Addressing the issues of racism, ethnic and national oppression, neocolonialism or neoimperialism, the American poet and playwright has been using his art to expose fissures in the dominant discourses, the central status of which still determines preferred social orders. Consequently, it comes as no surprise that the characteristic aesthetics of his *oeuvre* derive largely from his struggle with the rigid matter of language – the language which provides foundations for the 'majority' understanding of the world. So Baraka's rhetoric,

albeit sometimes sublimated and complex, frequently transpires as painfully brutal, 'primitivistic', or 'rough' – and hence, perhaps, the polarity of critical opinions concerning his work.

However, should one choose to approach Baraka's poetics departing from a perspective determined by the central tenets of traditional, mainstream aesthetics, it might well become clear that the poetic search of the artist – rejected by some and inspiring to others – is a form of sublimation of a language capable of addressing both the tragic African American experience and its present-day consequences. Such a task is, beyond doubt, a demanding one; it seems to require an unpolished discourse, one powerful enough to awaken all those who slumber in their conviction that, comprehending their own world, they have possessed a 'universal' understanding.

Such a conviction may, dangerously, result in more or less conscious acts of rhetorical marginalization of whole social groups: judging Baraka's aesthetics by the yardstick of the mainstream may well be tantamount to such a marginalizing tendency, possibly traceable back to a broader

Eurocentric world view, whose assumptions, if unqualified, may question the rudiments of social justice and the essential rights of self-determination – the elementary ideals of individual and collective freedom.

Beyond doubt, Amiri Baraka's *oeuvre* evokes anxiety and, as such, is 'politically incorrect'. However, if one bears in mind that, in the playwright's view, the *polis* as it is and the existing *law* – defining *correctness* – must undergo change, the 'political incorrectness' of his position is anything but unexpected. Alike as poet, playwright, essayist, and lecturer, Baraka consistently rejects any compromise in this respect, becoming a tribune of those who understand his language and an object of full-scale attacks by others, who – unwilling, or unable to see 'what it is that this Baraka wants' – are content to regard his work simply as racist, anti-Semitic, or anti-American. Apparently, for a plethora of reasons, many critics reject the possibility of seeing in Baraka's 'hate-speech' rhetoric a subversive stylistic device, the application of which decentralizes the principles by which the world may (uncritically) perceive itself to be *ultimately ordered*.

### Baraka's Vision of a Just America

This, however, does not mean that there is *no* 'hate' in Baraka's language. Likewise, it is not to argue that the claims of those who believe that any white artist allowing him- or herself the licence to use similar language would immediately be ostracized or, possibly, sued, are unfounded. Baraka is well aware of the fact that he operates at the threshold of mainstream acceptability – and, more frequently than not, crosses the line *on purpose*.

The above notwithstanding, one should not forget that the vision of a *just* America, which the author of *Blues People* advocates, is a vision of an America *different* from what she is today. One could then risk a statement that his flogging, provocative, brutal language, challenging the principles of the grammar of the dominant discourses on which the present-day concepts of Americanness are founded, allows the poet to formulate his patriotic creed.

This is not a paradox. Baraka's vision of a happy America is a non-Eurocentric vision: the decentralization of the corporate management of everyday reality, and thus the disempowerment of what the playwright considers to be the twenty-first-century incarnation of historically established colonialist thinking, seems to be the *sine qua non* for America to attain the state he would desire. For his uncompromising attitude, in awareness of the possible consequences of his actions, Amiri Baraka has proven ready to pay a high price.

And the poet's awareness is multi-dimensional. On the one hand, already in his work of the Beat period (1957–62), it was manifest that the central aesthetic and ethical problem Baraka would permanently face would be the struggle to break free from an ideological vicious circle: the idea of a class revolution, after all, was born out of the language of European philosophical thought and continues to rest upon the foundations of the Hegelian concept of history, reinterpreted by Marx. *The Slave*, for instance, is a drama of a 'victorious' revolutionary, who, having overthrown the former system, remains locked within the language of that system. At the same time, however, it is a tragedy of an *existential* dimension, where the touchstone of humanity is one's capacity for compassion in the face of ultimate matters born out of ideology, yet beyond ideology. On the other hand – within the frames of a thus determined language – it is impossible to create a vision of a world free from the former limitations; and thus the revolution, inevitably, must be a revolution in language.

Evolving, Baraka never rests in attempting to contrast the discourse of Americanness with the ideological basis of the American project, relying heavily on the biblical meta-narrative, or the (uncensored) text of the Declaration of Independence. Baraka *employs* 'Americanness' to ruthlessly criticize Americanness, as in the case of his unsettling poetic interpretation of Melville's *Moby Dick*, entitled 'Re: Port' (1996), or in his controversial poem 'Somebody Blew Up America' of 2001, the publication of which cost Baraka the title of Poet Laureate of the State of New Jersey.

## The Fourth American Revolution

**Paweł Jędrzejko** *Some fifteen years ago, Professor Teresa Pyzik, who had been the head of the Department of American Literature and Culture of the University of Silesia until mid-2009 when she retired, brought over, from somewhere, a copy of Christopher Bigsby's 1978 interview with you. Do you remember that conversation?*

**Amiri Baraka** Bigsby, yes, from England!

*Yes, from the University of East Anglia. This was an inspiring interview. A ragged copy of the text arrived in Poland, a country only just opening up after the downfall of Communist rule in 1989. I was a very young doctoral student at that time and Teresa Pyzik, who at that stage had intended to compile a collection of essays on American theatre by American playwrights, asked me to translate the interview into Polish. I do not think the translation ever got published – perhaps it will now – but your reflections then provided us with as valuable an insight as they do now. The central theme of the interview was the connection between the theatre and the revolution. Actually, in the conversation you prophesied a revolution to come. Let me refresh your memory: you were telling Christopher Bigsby of your fascination with the Cuban revolution and of your Cuba Libre, which you had written at the time.*

Yeah, sure.

*And you talked about The Dutchman, about The Slave, about the involvement of African American intellectuals with phenomena that practically shaped the world between the 1950s and 1978. I was wondering: over thirty years have passed since then – and you are still a revolutionary.*

(Laughing.) Yeah, I hope so.

*But has this revolution actually taken place? Is the revolution that has just come about recently the one you had foretold? Few people, really, had expected an African American President to be leading the United States, and now this is a fact.*

(Laughing.) OK, that's the States. I'll give you a copy of an essay that I wrote about that – just about that – where I said that there had

been four revolutions in the United States. One to get rid of the British. The second would be the Civil War. The third one – in the sixties – ended the American apartheid. And the fourth one was the election of Obama.<sup>1</sup>

The question remains: What do we do with that? How do we *define* what happened? I define it as the last stroke of the Civil Rights Movement and the first stroke of trying to deal with the question of a people's democracy. Now, I see it in stages, unlike I might have in the sixties. This *thing* is going to be overthrown, but it is not going to be overthrown in any kind of a fantastic, idealist way – because *they* are too rich. All the other revolutions took place in countries that essentially were peasant countries, poor countries, with a small working class. We've got a large working class who have been told they are middle class: it is mainly workers and a large middle class. And all that money. . . .

But, as you said, that is an enormous stroke to have gotten Obama in there. The question, again, is what do we do with it. Some people are clamouring for him to do more. Well, tell us how he is going to do that. Do you know who he is facing? Don't you know that corporations run this country? You know what I mean? And that most of the congressmen are nothing but lobbyists for various corporations. So what are you to do? Well, the point is that unless we, the people, can create some kind of a people's democratic force, a revolutionary democratic force, to take it to the next stage, it is going to be a long and lonely road – I *know* it will be long and drawn out anyway. We may well face a Sisyphus syndrome of sorts: *they* really are trying to do that. You achieve something, *they* try to push it down.

If Obama can get the second term – and I think that in that second term he might be able to do some other things – the situation might change, but this is a very protracted struggle he is up for. And still, the fact is that the majority is no longer, let's just say, a *white* majority: it is multinational. And that is what has to be understood: the Blacks, the Latinos, the Asians, and the progressive white people – *they did that*, they voted Obama in. Now they have to be self-reflective enough to see



Photos of Amiri Baraka at the Hipnoza Jazz Club in Katowice by courtesy of Ars Cameralis Silesiae Superioris.

*what next to do.* Because you can see that of the little over 43 per cent who'd wanted McCain, the most ignorant ones wanted him because he was white. The most disingenuous of that group wanted him because they thought he would protect their money better.

You see, that whole race thing is a canard – I mean, just a red herring. The fact is that the whole debate can be reduced to the question of how he will protect *their* corporate money. Now, all think about that. When Obama was voted in, I had a front page in my newspaper, the *Unity and Struggle*, in which the headline demanded directly: 'President Obama, no bailout: nationalize the banks, nationalize the automobile industry.' But there is an enormous pressure: the fact is that the United States *is* run by monopoly capitalist corporations. So it is a very, very hard struggle and I don't think a lot of us realize how difficult it will be to do. Even that goddamn Health Act.<sup>2</sup> Now, look at something like, say, the Equal Pay, which he passed in thirty days.<sup>3</sup> How come the Clinton faction hadn't passed that? They're sup-

posed to be *more* involved in it, but *he* passed it in a month.

But Obama's opposition then got re-organized – and nothing is going to be easy any more. Well, we better be hoping we can keep him in office for the second term in hope that something more decisive can happen. But these people are . . . die-hards.

*But I think that most of progressive Europe and America, the majority of the progressive Western world, really hope for it. And I do think that Obama will have very strong international support.*

Absolutely.

### What Kind of Revolution?

*It is interesting because thirty years ago when you were talking about the revolution, you had a Marxist revolution in mind, really.*

Yes . . .

*And in your plays and your poetry you created characters and lyrical 'Ts who actually strove for*



*a radical transformation, a revolutionary transformation, in the course of which the working class would indeed become a community of equals.*

Well, that's still to be, but it won't be *like that*. If you read Mao, you understand what the question is – the question of the unity of large groups of people, the question of stages in revolutionary development. And in the United States you are not going to have that: in the United States this will not happen. It is not nineteenth-century Russia, it is not early twentieth-century China. The US is the richest nation in the world, it is a monopoly capitalist, imperialist nation. But – let me stress the contradiction – Americans could and did elect an African American president. Why? Because among Obama's supporters there are 95 per cent of blacks, 60 per cent of Asians, and 60 per cent of the Latinos and progressive Whites. Now, *that* coalition is the one that can make a people's democracy. That's the revolutionary force – and it is not the force that, say, led the Chinese revolution, led the Russian revolution; it is the force that's going to lead an *American* revolution.

*But in the Polish context, the last twenty years of its recent history is the time when we finally got to breathe. Before 1989, and still now sometimes, we would associate the very idea of a Communist revolution with –*

– Stalin.

*Yes: with something contrary to what you hoped for in the sixties. The way we think about it today could not be further from the ideology derived from theoretical Marxist texts. To us, the practice of Communism was a strangling experience.*

It is a whole different world.

*So basically, the question is how do you see the idea of the revolution today, now that the Communist world, as it used to be – in practice – has come to an end?*

Well, no, it has not come to an end. Look at this: of all the nations in the world the only two remotely close to the United States were

the Soviet Union and China. In fact, the United States is in debt to the Chinese, and the Chinese only got on their feet in 1947. You know how fast that is? And though today Russia is a different case, in the Russia of 1917 the previous rule was overthrown. And though you could say that the Chinese took the bourgeois path, that of mixed economy – that, in fact, is the nature of the world ruled by the United States and Western imperialism. They exert so much influence on the world.

There was an argument back in the twenties: Lenin wrote a pamphlet as to what it is that is revolutionary about the United States of Europe.<sup>4</sup> He argued that the United States of Europe is a reformist cry. But now there *is* the United States of Europe, the EU – so what are you going to do about it? The point is that you are going to have to go through the process of transformation. In general, the same could be said about the United States, but we have to understand the difference in contexts: we have to use that context. There is nothing else we can do.

When we ran black people for office back in the seventies, people said, 'Well that's not a revolution,' but the point of that was that either we would do that or we would get killed – either we did that or we're going to die. We were going to be the Black Panthers.

*The question was one of survival . . .*

Right. So – you have to do what you can do in any situation. I think the election of Obama was a marvellous step forward, but the people who did it don't understand yet what they did.

## **The American Conscience**

*That there is still lots to come?*

Yes. Because if you instil unity among such numbers of Blacks, such numbers of Latinos, so many Asians, and now, a number of progressive white people, you could run this country, you could run the United States. But they are not working toward it. The minute the election is over with, they're back to



sectarian positions again. And the whole question now is, for instance, that you see the Black Caucus jumping on Obama about unemployment. Well, who the *fuck* . . . Don't they *know*? They've been in Congress, don't they know who stops unemployment? Obama gave money to banks: but are they giving out loans? (*Laughs.*) No. But I can understand their sympathy, except that you have to see, a lot of those people were with Hillary Clinton to the bitter end.

I always think that our common goals would bring us all together. I mean, you're going to tell me now that these people have been with Hillary Clinton to the last minute, and that they're jealous of Obama, too. But the only thing I'm saying is that the United States is the United States – and we have to look at it in the context of that complexity. How do we finally get to socialism? It is not going to be like in Russia, it is not going to be like in China, it is not going to be like in Cuba.

*Well, did you know that in the sixties, or when you talked to Bigsby in 1978? Did you think this way thirty years ago?*

No, because I was younger and . . . I was impatient. (*Laughter.*)

*So, what is the validity of your earlier work today? Because myself, I see the importance of the plays that actually made the name of Amiri Baraka separate from the name of LeRoy Jones. Only these texts are read differently today.*

Yes, you see . . . the one thing we have to remember is that the plays he wrote then, they won't let them be performed any more. I mean, the plays that he writes right now, they won't let be performed either. (*Laughter.*) I had two plays produced last year, out of fifty or sixty texts.

*Reverting to our talk about being a revolutionary, let me ask you about your patriotism, which I have always envisaged as a whip of sorts. You have been the conscience of the United States, especially its racial conscience, both in the beginning and now. Yet today you use vocabulary that frequently alludes to, or relies upon, the Apocalypse, upon the Bible. You never did that in the sixties. Is it because at that time you were much more Marxist?*

I hadn't read the Bible then. (*Laughter.*)

*But still, you are the revolutionary . . .*

Because to me no text is more revolutionary than the Book of Revelations. You read the Revelations: you know that at least in Revelations the serpent, the beast, gets killed. The 666 gets killed, and he gets killed nowhere else but in the Bible. He gets iced, you know, and that's what I was referring to.

Nat Turner was trying to start a revolution, and that's why he killed fifty-five people. But you know what was he trying to do? Slay the serpent! What is it in Revelations? Slay the serpent, it's the same thing. But I feel that in the context of the United States now we have to learn to work with what we have. What *do* we have? We have a big coalition of people who are objectively a united front, but subjectively don't understand that. They don't understand who they are.

*And this is where your poetry comes in? What's your function now?*

It's the same thing: to raise consciousness.

*I talked to Ron Padgett a couple of years back – he's a friend. He came down to Silesia. He was absolutely enamoured of you when he was still young.*

Oh, yeah!

*Ron told us that in this early period, even before he would become your younger colleague as a poet, he would publish your texts in his high school literary magazine called The White Dove Review. Then you became the imam, the leader of the Nation. Now, in a sense you still remain a leader, disproving Kristeva's claim that today you are allowed to rebel against anything. In fact, you can rebel against anything, yet, when you do rebel, you don't get published.*

Well, that's it. That's the point.

*Your plays do not get staged.*

Well, we're in Poland, we're not in New York, see? They learn, they learn from their

mistakes, they do. But they won't publish you as much, they won't produce you as much – and that's to be expected, I think. People are always asking me: 'Why don't they do your plays on Broadway?' Well, I wouldn't do *their* plays on Broadway, if I had control. I wouldn't produce this shit, you know, so why would they produce mine, you know. (*Laughing.*) If you're telling somebody to die, why should they put that on the board? Say, they're telling me to die, but I'm going to produce their plays anyway? This is not how it works.

### **Punishment for a Poem**

*Don't you ever get tired of the fight, weary of the struggle?*

Tired? Tired is another kind of temper. I get *pissed off*, but *tired* is another thing. I get tired. I go to sleep. I wake up. But I don't get tired in the sense in which you ask. I get pissed off all the time; there is enough to keep your head burning. You read the newspapers, watch television, hear what people say. It'll keep you awake, with your fists clenched all the time, you know, all this stupid shit.

*So, how much trouble did you get for 'Somebody Blew Up America'?<sup>5</sup>*

Oh! Well, I lost \$60,000 in the last year and that's years later. I lost \$60,000 out of my income. I lost the \$20,000 they were supposed to pay me for it, and I was a Poet Laureate. I never got that. I was supposed to have a book published by Harvard and another book of four essays. I didn't deliver speeches I was supposed to give, and the man who was supposed to publish them, 'Skip' Gates, he did not do it.<sup>6</sup> He won't even answer my phone calls. It's like that . . . You shouldn't be alarmed at that. I was supposed to do a book signing on 15 October at Lincoln Center and teach a course at Lincoln Center in December and they cancelled both of those.<sup>7</sup> They cancelled those two days ago. They called me up, pissed off.

*And what was the excuse? The pretence under which they cancelled those book signings?*

Did they say why they cancelled it? No. (*Smiling*). They simply said it was not happening.

OK, all right.

The course I was supposed to give? They said nobody registered for it. They said there were only a few people who did register. I know, I know . . . But if you want to read about it, get on the internet.<sup>8</sup>

The man who organized it, who invited me to do it, was Phil Schaap.<sup>9</sup> And then they surprised *him*. He got pissed off and wrote a long thing asking why were they doing this, but I called him and told him why they were *really* doing it. They don't want you: if they say 'You're dead,' then you're dead, and that's it.

### Mainstream and 'Counterculture'

*Obviously you're not dead. If the Norton Anthology of American Literature anthologizes you, if the Heath Anthology of American Literature anthologizes you, if you are a part of university curricula? You really are mainstream in that respect – and then at the same time, you somehow manage to always weasel out of the mainstream.*

(*Laughing.*) See, the mainstream doesn't include me in the first place. That's an illusion.

*Oh, but it does!*

That's an illusion. They make it seem that way. Look, Edward Albee and I started at the same time. We were in the same playwriting group, you understand?

*Of course.*

Albee has won four Pulitzer Prizes. I once went to Albee's house and I said, 'Edward, that's a beautiful reproduction of a Picasso you have.' (*Laughing.*) He said: 'That's not a reproduction, that's an original.' And I had never been in anyone's house who had a real Picasso. How was I supposed to act? (*Laughing.*) But anyway . . . I can tell you that all

those people who are making millions of dollars – we were raised up in the same village together, at the same time, you know. So how . . . it's just incredible!

*I guess, Ron Padgett would concur with my idea of you being 'mainstream'.*

Well, maybe it's mainstream but a different mainstream, that's what it is. (*Laughing.*)

*It's a 'countercultural mainstream', some sort of a postmodern hybrid, that's what it is like . . . but when Howl was published, the Beats were the counterculture, right?*

That's what Condoleezza Rice said, when she was talking about the Civil Rights Movement. She was asked: 'Weren't you interested in the Civil Rights Movement?' and she said: 'I was learning to play the piano and I was in college,' and, 'Besides, I've never paid attention to the counterculture.'<sup>10</sup>





Condoleezza Rice actually called the Black Power Movement 'counterculture'?

The *counterculture*! I've been called a lot of bad things, but that's the worst thing I've ever been called; I'd never been called 'the counterculture' . . . A Black Power maniac, or some shit like that, but not the *counterculture*! (Laughs.)

See, this is the irony – and the contradiction. It's like those salmon that go up the river and die so the other salmon can get by them. So there is the Movement, and then there are the people who get up *over* the Movement, who get raised *by* the Movement, but don't have to go through what the Movement had to go through. If they are not conscious of what those who participated in the Movement had to go through – it is a drag to them; they want to have nothing to do with *that*, even though that's what is responsible for what they are. They do not want to relate to it, you see?

*They swim right over –*

Absolutely. And they don't want any kind of connection with that. And that's . . . that's tragic but it's the truth! It's the truth, the very truth.

*And what about Islam? When you embraced Islam, it was a very distinctive moment in your career. Is it still there? Once you become an imam, you never cease to be one, do you?*

(Laughs.) I was only an imam in direct relationship to people – I've never been to the mosque.

### A 'Metaphorical' Muslim

*It's been largely a metaphorical function?*

Right. I've never been a Muslim, although they think so on airplanes. (Laughs.) I've never been a Muslim, I've never had anything to do with Islam. I always loved Malcolm X, a Muslim gave me my name.

*Do you remember who that person was?*

Yeah, the man who buried Malcolm X.

*You never told Bigsby his name.*

Hesham Jaaber, the guy who buried Malcolm . . . in the film – the tall, dark-skinned brother.<sup>11</sup> He gave me the name in 1967 when I went to jail. He came to me and said, 'You are a leader, you need leading information.' And I was trying to get an African name, but he gave me an Arabic name – and I changed it. He gave me the name Amir Baraka, which is Arabic, and so I made it Swahili, so it's Amiri Baraka. In Swahili the next to last syllable is stressed, Swahili always has a vowel on the end.

*Is there a difference between LeRoy Jones and Amiri Baraka comparable to the difference between Indian John and Chingachgook of Cooper's novel? This character is a great leader of the Lenni Lenape nation across the Frontier – and 'one of those Indians' on the other side . . .*

The difference is that one is older than the other one: *that's* the main difference. (Laughs.) One is very old, the other one young. And wild. But one thing about being young and wild is that *if you survive that*, so much the better: *if you can survive it*. And some of them don't survive it.

*About your visit to Poland: it is a very different context, obviously. Poland is a space in which we basically are reinventing ourselves as we speak. It's only been twenty years since the changes of the political and economic systems, and these changes have been both radical and very, very fast. And ours is a nation of people who had to struggle for their identity for a very long time. Yet, unlike Americans, we progressed from oppressive Communism to what seems to be a relatively benign capitalism of today. We are still in the process. Moreover, we only discovered that we were white in 1989, when the borders opened. Previous to that, we basically didn't have any colour, or didn't realize that. Is there a part of the African American experience which you think could, or would, be translatable into the Polish context?*

The difference is that the Poles, in my understanding, have been oppressed by Germans, Russians and –

Basically everybody . . .

– but the idea of being a chattel slave is – different. W. E. B. Du Bois defined it. He said that many people have suffered as much as we, but none of them was *real estate*.

It's only been 145 years since we actually were chattel slaves, so then to look up and see Obama as the President – that's an *amazing* idea. But it also shows you the power of people when they focus directly on something that they want and need: that keeps the United States what it is . . . because there are so many games played on people; and then the constant bullshit of being influenced by radio, television, all kinds of media, it's just bullshit, bullshit.

### Cut Off at the Pass

When they discovered ten years ago that the leading incremental leap in reading was among young black people, then suddenly Dun and Bradstreet and all the major houses, began to do lines of black books. But what were they doing: were they doing Du Bois? And Fred Douglass? And Morrison? No. They were doing all those 'fuck books' – you know, sex, drugs. You go in any drugstore and there you'll see a whole line of those books. Suddenly, yes. Because they're cutting the serious black writers off at the pass. You are *not* going to read great literature. OK, you *can* read, so we got something for you.

*Is it a question of readerly laziness, or the pace, or the lack of the need to keep conscious?*

No, no, no. The corporations that run the world also run the United States. If they want to respond to black youth reading by putting out a line of books that don't say shit about the real world, they'll do it. Why? Because they can make money without being threatened. Do you want them to read Fred Douglass, do you want them to read Du Bois? Do you want them to read the autobiography of Malcolm X? No. If the black youth go to college, they *might* read it.

*Of course, the college students would, but that's not an easy read. And choices presented by these*

*texts are not easy choices. But, to revert to my question, what do you think your poetry will do for the Poles?*

I have no idea.

*You have no expectations whatsoever?*

Well . . . No, it's what any foreign literature does to people who read. What did German literature do for me, or French literature – even though I couldn't speak French of German? Or Russian literature, or Chinese literature?

*Don't you think it is you performing your poetry that actually makes a difference?*

Maybe. Maybe it'll cause the audience to read it. Maybe they will have some ideas. Those ideas: how do they apply to the Polish context? We're always trying to raise people's consciousness, to make them think, in whatever context they are.

*So it is no longer a promise of revolution. Right now it is really a question of a constant, unflinching raising of consciousness.*

That's all – that's all you can do. We are running stuff in our city, and I've put out a newspaper of about ten thousand copies. Those ten thousand copies will land in the hands of folks, so maybe ten thousand people will have advanced their consciousness. What did we say in our last newspaper? Remember? 'President Obama: no bailout. Nationalize the banks, nationalize the auto companies.' So that's what we are: we are a capitalist country and we tell the authorities to nationalize it. As editors, we haven't even talked about socialism, we are talking about *nationalization*, that is how low in terms of the developmental stages of socialism our arguments are. And they are that low because the productive forces are that high. And a lot of people are bribed. The United States is full of people being bribed.

*Isn't the whole Western world, really?*

Well, that's what it is, based on the superprofits they drag out of the Third World. And

you are going to have to put up with that, or you will have to fight it. You see?

*So what does a romantic poet like yourself do in the contemporary, twenty-first-century world?*

Write and publish!

*Write and publish? Keep struggling?*

Well, that's my job. . . . (*Laughs.*) That's my gig!

*Thank you very much!*

Thank you, take care!

## Notes and References

I wish to express my sincere thanks to Amiri Baraka for the authorization of the present text; to Dave Burrell for his comments during the conversation; to Ron Padgett for the clarifications concerning his relations with Amiri Baraka; to Eric Starnes for his help in transcribing the recording of the interview; to Professors Christopher Bigsby, Maria Shevtsova, and Simon Trussler for granting me the permission to translate and publish the TQ 1978 interview in Polish in *Er(r)go – Journal of Theory, Culture and Literary Studies*, and, last but not least, to the organizers of the 'Ars Cameralis Silesiae Superioris' Festival for their kind permission to use original photographs of Amiri Baraka's performance in Katowice as well as for their long-term contribution to the development of Polish and international culture.

1. 'There have already been Four Revolutions in the United States. The first in the eighteenth century, for "independence" (quotes, because in some ways it never completely happened. Check out British holdings in the US). The second in the nineteenth century, the Civil War, which ended chattel slavery (and with the 13th, 14th, 15th amendments) and competitive capitalism, ushered in monopoly capitalism and began to free the white

worker from the land. . . . The third revolution was the fifties-to-seventies Civil Rights and Black Liberation Movements which ended petty apartheid and segregation (Civil Rights Bill, Voting Rights Bill, Brown vs. Bd of Ed). Though a case could be made that this was an extended motion that was initiated by the post-Civil War move out of the south by millions of Black people transforming the Afro American people from a largely peasant rural people to a working class. An urban proletariat. . . . The Obama election is the fourth revolution! What is needed now is for the would-be Left, the revolutionaries, the progressive sector of the body politic, the Communists to correctly analyze and project widely just what kind of revolution this is. But more than that, lay out exactly what is to be done at this point, the entry to a new stage of US social development, like we used to say, what is the key link, to make the next forward motion?' Amiri Baraka, *We Are Already In The Future!* <<http://mbantunyankompong.wordpress.com/2008/12/03/guest-commentator-amiri-baraka/>>, accessed 29 March 2010.

2. The Health Bill of 8 November 2009.

3. The Equal Pay Bill of 29 January 2009.

4. Possibly a reference to Lenin's pamphlet *О лозунге Соединенных Штатов Европы* (*On the Slogan of the United States of Europe*), written in Zurich, c. 1916.

5. Statement by Amiri Baraka, 'I WILL NOT APOLOGIZE, I WILL NOT RESIGN', New Jersey Poet Laureate <[www.mindfully.org/Reform/2002/Amiri-Baraka-Poet-NJ20oct02.htm](http://www.mindfully.org/Reform/2002/Amiri-Baraka-Poet-NJ20oct02.htm)>, accessed 28 March 2010.

6. Henry Louis 'Skip' Gates, Jr., an American literary critic, educator, scholar, writer, and editor.

7. See <[www.jalc.org/about/news/2007/pdf/2009-07-24.Swing%20U%20Fall%20Term%202009.pdf](http://www.jalc.org/about/news/2007/pdf/2009-07-24.Swing%20U%20Fall%20Term%202009.pdf)>.

8. Amiri Baraka, 'GAZA @ Lincoln Center: Fighting Political Censorship in the US 'Art World'' <<http://panopticonreview.blogspot.com/2009/11/gaza-lincoln-center-amiri-baraka-fights.html>>, accessed 28 March 2010.

9. Phil Schaap, professor of history and music at Columbia University and Rutgers University, and, at present, at Princeton University and the Juilliard School. A jazz DJ, historian, and producer.

10. Cf. 'Condoleezza Rice: Civil Rights Struggle Didn't Affect Me', 30 September 2005 <[www.michaelmoore.com/words/latest-news/condoleezza-rice-civil-rights-struggle-didnt-affect-me](http://www.michaelmoore.com/words/latest-news/condoleezza-rice-civil-rights-struggle-didnt-affect-me)>.

11. A reference to Spike Lee's film *Malcolm X*.