

2014

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Repository Citation

Benston, KW. "Preface to a Twenty Volume Critical Note: For Amiri, Ghost of the Future," *Callaloo* 37 no. 3, 2014: 480-482.

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Callaloo, Volume 37, Number 3, Summer 2014, pp. 480-482 (Article)

Published by The Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: [10.1353/cal.2014.0118](https://doi.org/10.1353/cal.2014.0118)



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PREFACE TO A TWENTY VOLUME CRITICAL NOTE For Amiri, Ghost of the Future

by Kimberly W. Benston

Amiri Baraka will for me be forever entwined with Larry Neal. I had read much of Baraka's work by the time I enrolled in Larry's class "Black Power and the Black Arts" in 1972, but Larry made vivid the living context in which so much of Baraka's most stirring work had its dramatic effect. In that class, the work wasn't embalmed as historical artifact or made precious as an accomplishment of literary tradition; it was burning with prescience, presence, and potency. It seemed, if anything, more urgent in its implications and possibilities than when it spilled into the Black Arts Movement from Baraka's fervid imagination. Paradoxically, Larry made us feel this powerful sense of immediacy by disclosing the intellectual fiber of Baraka's vision, the gritty awareness of modern Western culture subtending the incendiary pronouncements that startled us to attention: through Larry's insight and eloquence, we understood that Baraka wasn't just throwing homemade bombs at the cultural establishment; he was unraveling its dilapidated structure, porous intellectual brick by brittle sentimental brick, exposing its inner contradictions through that distinctive Barakan blend of verbal wizardry, sardonic repudiation, and (this being the part so easily overlooked, by celebrants as much as detractors) sturdy and knowing craft. Through Larry's learning, at once streetwise and book-smart, we grasped that Baraka's work was a kind of explosive kenning, as canny as it was uncanny.

In preparation for writing a chapter of my college senior thesis in the spring of 1974, I traveled to Detroit to see *Slave Ship* in Concept East's church-based community theater. When I arrived, I found that the entire church meeting hall had been transformed into a scene of horror, a vessel transporting an angry, bewildered, suffering, but ultimately resistant remnant of African society to what Baraka called "the grey hideous west," embodied in a single White Figure (played in white face by an African American actor). Throughout the play, the black cast brilliantly directed its vituperative critique and rebellious energies toward me, the lone white audience member, until the play crescendoed toward its ritual triumph as the black nation rose up in revolutionary triumph over the oppressor by dropping the White Figure's body at my feet. As I left the theater near midnight to walk Detroit's streets toward the train station for my trip back to Connecticut, I realized I had left the sanctuary of performance, the citadel of metaphor, for the hard authenticity of the real. Of such ironic dis-figurations were Baraka's works consistently composed: "revolution" could become real only if first rehearsed and thereby internalized and believed; reality could be transfused with rich cultural implication only if pressed forward by art, which melted into air once inscribed. "Performance" was for Baraka a trope for the real *within* the aesthetic, asserting its purchase on authenticity over and against the

written; but performance remained—in reality—yet another modality of imagination and desire. For Baraka, desire longed for its dissolution in action, a yearning that reflected the urge to transform the narratives of history into the Event of liberation: early he had written, “what is tomorrow / that it cannot come / today?” (“Valéry as Dictator,” *Dead Lecturer* 78).

From its first emanations, Baraka’s voice was pertinacious, demanding, insistently provocative, yet tinged with a note of untimely angst, as if slightly behind or ahead of the historical beat to which he relentlessly addressed himself. He spoke as an apostle of change and movement, but with a blend of impatience and tenderness that suggested a voice struggling to redeem the specters of inherited injustice without losing the present in lamentation and doubt: “A political art, let it be / tenderness . . . / Let the combination of morality / and inhumanity / begin” (“Short Speech to My Friends,” *Dead Lecturer* 29). At times, his writing seems entangled in the phantasmagoria and anxiety, the fear and obsession that come from looking without blinking at our history of national brutality and mendacity, risks he accepted as a requirement of his charge to iterate a promise of responsibility for the future. Baraka aimed always to “move with history,” but the underlining of this intention was an intuition of history’s disjuncture with time, which layered past, present, and future such that revolution could become its own specter, and the past could, it turns out, be where revolution lay waiting for us *in the tradition*: “The soul’s / warmth / is how / shall I say / it, / It’s own. A place / of warmth, for children wd dance there, / if they cd. If they / left their brittle selves behind” (“From An Almanac [3],” *Preface* 44). Baraka seemed ever ready to shed himself, to leave himself behind on his way to a fuller, less brittle mode of embodiment. That is perhaps why I sensed in his work from first to last something of the child, though a child with a very old soul, a specter of his best self, striving ever to will us with him into a liberated future, to begin again by coming back to that place of beginning that still haunts us, in the village from which ancestors were uprooted, in the slave ship, in every crevice of a shared history of cruelty and survival, and in the neighborhood where as children we learned the first steps of our tender, moral, and fiercely unyielding struggle for freedom:

Back-at-You

Bronze buckaroos
 and wild loop-garoos
 we all clatter-chatter
 in the wine-dark hours
 of a Village haunt
 a Southside joint
 our evol howls settling
 against the hard lawngreen
 native freewayescape

we all despise
 the frogeyed sirens
 beckoning, beckoning
 toward the triumph of our anger or abjection;
 we all reach,

CALLALO

ironists and mimics at the core,
for the canon
as we herald some still deferred
blowup of america's last empiric days

but I'm sure I copped a sight—
in a furtive moment between
the brilliant gestures and their exegetical recording—
I'm certain that I saw
shimmering in our mutual speculum
two scared and exhilarated kids
patched-kneed, knobby-headed
clutching the b-ball
darting frantically
jerky rhythms—
say, jackson, slap me five—
terror-stricken and over-joyed
head-faking in imitative style
through the Chaos
we called
The Life

You turned inside-out
making the histrionics of insurgence
a bloodpulse of self-fashioning
I inward
to map your shifts and jukes

Hey brother—
wanna go down
to the yard
and
play a little
one
on
one?

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