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January 11, 2013

Remembering Amiri Baraka

I must pause a moment and give Amiri Baraka credit for writing the words and selecting the photographs that helped me live into my own terribleness as an African-American woman in the last half of the 20th century, in the beginning of the 21st century, in the United States of America. I am a black woman in America, and I love it. I love my own being. I always loved my people, my family, my race, and my nation. I always loved my human self, my black self, my American self. Amiri Baraka helped me to understand the terribleness of such love.

I met Amiri Baraka in college, an image on a poster hanging in m y boyfriend's dorm room. I read Baraka's poems and plays and watched as he presided over a Black political convention in Gary, Indiana. Time passed, and watching the PBS documentary – *Eyes on the Prize*—with my children, I introduced him to them. My daughter went to hear him read just a few short months ago.

Baraka understood that there was no such thing as art for art's sake. There is point-of-view and intentionality whether we say so or not. There is no neutral ground. All the arts, poetry and prose, journalism and scholarship, ought to be about human liberation. It ought to be about transformation.

He was a link connecting the howling poetry and spontaneous prose of the beat generation to the impulse toward human liberation found in the Black Arts Movement and in the contemporary Hip-Hop nation. The beats took the word for defeat, for a beat up, beat down condition and turned it into a transgressive instrument intended to shine a light on the dark side of post World War II bourgeois conformity. Words became wrecking balls tearing down worn, dilapidated cultural structures to make space for a gleaming bright architecture of new dreams and fresh values, and more expansive human possibilities. Such work of deconstruction and of re-creation is still underway.

In 1961, Baraka, then known as LeRoi Jones, and Diane DiPrima were arrested on charges of obscenity. They published a literary newsletter. One issue contained excerpts from his work *The Systems of Dante's Hell* which was about a homosexual rape in the army. Ann Charters writing in *The Portable Beat Reader* describes the outcome.

> The case never went to court, because Jones requested a grand jury hearing and spent two days on the stand. He brought in a pile of books that had been labeled "obscene," ranging from Catullus to James Joyce's *Ulysses,* and read aloud for hours to the grand jury. They refused to return an indictment. (336-337)

His work was never cautious, not always wise, or factual or appreciated. He was not given tenure at Rutgers. And when he refused to step down as poet laureate of New Jersey in the wake of controversy over a poem written about 9/11, the governor ended the position altogether. He was an equal opportunity critic. He made us uncomfortable. And, reading some of his early work takes us back

to specific space-time coordinates. Yet, he still makes us feel the imperative to write with a will to create space for real love. Not an evil, but an evolved love. In his poem “Black Art” he says:

> Let there be no love poems written
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> until love can exist freely and
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> cleanly.

I can write with, from and about radical love because his love has already spoken the anger. I can love the hell and the fear out of myself and out of those brave enough to love a radical love with me because he reminded us that despite all we have suffered in the United States, black people are and ought to be lovers, sons and daughters of lovers and warriors and “are poems, poets & all the loveliness here in the world.”

Back to our terribleness. When we think of ourselves as terrible, we are exploding all the negative stereotypes about African peoples with the truth power of the wonders of the world and of human genius built with black hands. We recognize our kinship to ancient Egypt and to the people who designed and built the pyramids. We return to the holiness of the West African river rites that provided a context for enslaved Africans in the United States to understand the ritual of baptism. “Wade in the water, God’s gone trouble the water”, was another way to honor the goddess of the waters—Holy Spirit. And spirit possession is still a communication and a release. The spirituals and the blues have roots in African philosophy and cosmology that help us know who we are as members of the human family and not simply as enslaved and brutalized people thought to be less than human. Baraka helped us to see these things and turn terrible as a term of shock and upset into awesome appreciation. We are a formidable people, a terrible people for having survived all that a political economy based on race, class, and sexual oppression has thrown at us. We have come a mighty long way, and still we have a mighty long way to go.

I say: in our human terribleness, the terribleness of every race and tribe and nation, in our divine capacity to allow Divine Love to love through us, we have the capacity to re-create the world and make it a place of justice and of peace.

Thank you Amiri Baraka for all you taught us. Thank you for your words and for your passion, for your anger and even for your mistakes. Thank you for your challenge to us and for your example of courage and commitment.

May you dwell in peace and joy with the ancestors.