Group C

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Politics and Poetry: An Analysis of Amiri Baraka and the Black Arts Movement

Introduction

The relationship between art, culture and the American Civil Rights movement is incredibly complex. The successes and progression of the Civil Rights movement of the 50s and 60s gave way to the Black Arts Movement of the 60s and 70s. This project aims to contextualize and interpret the life and poetry of Amiri Baraka, a prominent author and activist associated with the Black Arts Movement. Baraka played a founding role in the Black Arts movement and the creation of Uplift Tradition. He was an active part of the Civil Rights movement and a significant political figure during its time period. This project explores how two of Baraka’s poems, one from his early and then later career, compare to the context in which the content is placed. Baraka has published countless poems but many acts as a reflection of an idea that either Baraka has analyzed or experienced. Baraka’s work not only serves to highlight the pain and anger experienced by black Americans during the civil rights movement, but also functions as a window into Baraka’s own experiences and political perspectives during this time period.

Despite the significance of Baraka’s work, his place in the Civil Rights movement has often been overshadowed by figures with less extreme views. Baraka's more extreme views, often diving into Marxism and problematic perspectives on race and gender, have often led to his removal from early historiography of the movement. A large majority of academic analyses on Baraka’s work date back to the 80’s when cultural perspectives on his radical narratives become more tolerable. Additionally, he is thrust back into the spotlight of academic literature shortly after the publishing of his controversial poem “Somebody Blew Up America”, which was criticized for its antisemitic remarks. The earlier work of Amiri is often characterized as political, fiery, and even radical in its extremist viewpoints regarding race. Like all artists, Baraka’s work went through a number of evolutions and his work is reflective of those changes. Baraka’s work is of course critically acclaimed but also brought lots of critics, due to his radical views. In many ways Baraka’s biggest strengths also served to be detrimental to his work.

Amiri Baraka and his work carry still great significance; as his unfiltered commentary played an important role in the movement. Baraka essentially being one of the originators within the Black Arts Movement, wrote and commentated often on black artists’ work ranging from literary works to musical creations; which he found were important to the development and livelihood of a black culture. Baraka’s work is often cited as the foundation of the Black Arts movement and is in high regard for how willing he was to challenge common opinions and views despite its controversies.

Biography

Baraka, born 1934 and originally named Leroy Jones, came into adulthood during the height of the Civil Rights movement. One author describes his adolescence as “the product of a black middle-class family—a bohemian artist in revolt against middle-class values. Being black, however gave this familiar bohemian pattern an added twist for Jones compounded the typical bohemian attacks on middle class values with even more vociferous attacks upon the Negro middle-class” (Smith 1986, 236). Baraka and his work are a culmination of his own experiences and a reflection of events and changes that Amiri had gone through during his lifetime. This compound tension between being both black and middle class in a period dominated by the upper class white, contributed to Baraka’s push towards politics. Baraka’s adolescence was marred with racism and prejudice against his racial background. Baraka began to develop an anger against white Americans, specifically white men, a perspective that was only fortified as Baraka continued to suffer in a racist America.

After a brief stint in the military Baraka moved to New York and began to develop a strong interest in the culture there. Here he began his first interactions with what would become the Black Arts Movement. Baraka had a number of inspirations of his own. Jazz music is something that even as a kid Baraka loved, he would continue to enjoy music in his life as he went on creating. Baraka writes about his childhood, how that affected his view on the world as he grew up, he was presented with the struggles of both adolescence and being black in a very racist America. In the autobiography of LeRoi Jones, he speaks on this segregation and how it was a constant reminder to him that he was “different” from others. He starts to develop his own poetic voice, inspired by Jazz, to speak on his experiences with racism and prejudice. In a discussion on poetic styling in Baraka’s work Jay R. Berry describes Baraka’s style as revising “a traditional Euro-American poetic form, such as the sonnet, to express his ideas about the condition of Afro-American life”. Baraka’s inspiration gave him direction when pursing his talents as a writer. His work, inspired by the black culture around him, was also able to contribute back to his community thereby becoming a piece of black culture. This is where the significance of Amiri Baraka lies—in his claim to being one of the foundational figures of the Black Arts movement. The self-expression of personal frustration and pain towards white suppressors was novel for his time period. Leading to Baraka’s work sparking an entire new movement of other black poets and artists.

Poetry Analysis

Poems often offer further than was is displayed stories about the world, events, history, people, things, there is no limit to what a poem can be about. Some poems are straightforward and only need a minimal level of digging to find the meaning behind it. Amiri Baraka and his work often create intense levels of thought provocation and entire essays can be written on a single poem. Baraka uses so many different aspects and ideas in combination with a unique style that tells stories of his own experiences or of events that have taken place. Baraka speaks through his work and even in times where he faced heavy criticism rarely did he retract the ideas he portrayed.

“An Agony. As Now” 1964

This poem contains heavy “imagery” for lack of better words but starts with a statement that many observe similarly “I am inside someone who hates me.”, this speaks to a level of self-hatred that Baraka holds against himself. It sets up the rest of the reading as it focuses on the ideas of what a soul is or what contains that soul. In this poem, the words flesh, and metal are used almost interchangeably. “As the metal, is hot,” One line says before ending with “It burns the thing inside it. And that thing screams.”

Reading the poem in its true form of course, is the most effective way of creating one’s own perception of the tones behind this poem. Using textual analysis over a number of poems written by Amiri some words appear often like flesh, soul, pain, and more. Many of those words appear here in this reading. Amiri challenges the ideas of what a soul is, what flesh is, what pain is, and the ideas he challenges relate to his own experiences in life. In 1964 The Civil Rights Act is passed but, does this end all racism throughout the entire American population and its systems. Systemic discrimination is something that Amiri discusses and writes about often and many found that this poem plays into that as well. The poem for many plays into the perceptions of black people in America and the effects it has on them. Through the formation of the poem, Amiri challenges so many ideas and is just one example of why so many find his work important even till this day.

“Why is We Americans” 2002

Why Is We Americans was performed on Def Poetry in the early 2000s by Amiri Baraka. From what is gathered, this poem was not published anywhere else and was made specifically for this episode. The performance brings the words alive as Amiri’s poem highlights several topics. “We want to be paid.” is an early line and plays into the rest of the poem as it’s about receiving reparations for all of the terrible things done to black Americans and other cultures that have felt the effects of “America.” Amiri even points to poor white people as someone the government should support. This poem name calls many instances of land stolen, cultures torn apart, and people killed, all for the sake of America. These acts are what the poem is about, recognizing all of the terrible things done throughout history and what should happen to help those affected. It will never feel like home to those unfairly represented and mistreated if not done.

The context is more clearly laid out in this excerpt because it calls back to incidents of terrible acts and even worse treatment of countless people, specifically Black people. “We want to be paid.” Amiri exclaims, “the average worker farmer wage for all those years we gave it free.” This line points to the centuries of slavery during the founding and development of the US, as slavery was often the driving force of labor during these times. This idea continues as Amiri talks about the killings, lynching's, and unwarranted jailing's as just a *few* examples of how Black people have been treated. He uses these points to relay that although slavery was abolished and there are no longer enslaved people in the same context compared to before, the effects of slavery still present themselves within communities and that those affected should be built a system to provide reparations. Once that is done, then they, as in the African American community, will agree to become an “American” as it finally holds something that represents them fairly.

Impact on Politics

Amiri Baraka’s significance is in his role in the Civil Rights movement. Baraka took on the Marxist perspective early in the movement. Eventually he rose to be a dominating figure in political discussions. Yet Baraka’s legacy survives more on his role in politics within the arts. Specifically, Baraka was one of the first artists to contribute and establish the Black Arts movement. His early works of poetry went on to inspire other artists to develop what would be one of the most impactful pieces of widespread artistic expression during the Civil Rights era. Whilst Baraka was an avid follower of the black power movement; historical reflections on his work highlight the opposition between core themes of self reliance and toxic masculinity found within the movement, and the vulnerability of Baraka’s work. “Despite an emerging revisionist historiography that illuminates the historical antecedents of black power’s insistence on self-determination, armed self-defense, and reparations, the consensus that diagnoses black power as a descent from uplift’s responsible patriarchy into the anarchic gender dynamics of black macho remains largely unchallenged” (Matlin 2006, 93). The same author then continues to establish Baraka’s importance in what he refers to as uplift tradition, which he expresses as, “Baraka in fact reformulated the long-standing ideals of social and moral uplift in ways that preserved the notion of a socially responsible patriarchy” (93). Uplift tradition was a product of the increase of Black culture during the Black Arts movement. The use of widespread social and moral positivity within the black community acted as a form of backlash against white oppressors, a thought processes not unfamiliar to Baraka.

Controversial Views

While Barka made significant contributions to the Black Arts and Civil Rights movements, he is often criticized for the extremity of his views. One notable example exists not within his poetry but a series of essays published in 1966. In one he writes, “The average ofay thinks of the Black man as potentially raping every white lady in sight. Which is true, in the sense that the Black man should want to rob the white man of everything he has” (Baraka 255). Here Baraka’s political narrative has extended beyond a productive level of anger and challenge against white supremacy, instead it crosses the line into blatant sexism. While one author justifies Baraka’s graphic narrative by saying, "the rape here is clearly intended at least partly as a metaphor for property appropriation in general, i.e., as part of a black revolution against white economic domination” (Dorfman 2016, 84); this doesn’t detract from the negative impact that such writing has on women and the Civil Rights movement itself. Additionally, Barka has received significant backlash for the aforementioned poem “Somebody Blew Up America”. This poem written shortly after 9/11, blames not only the Bush administration but also Israeli government and citizens for the attacks. A rightly criticized perspective that is not only false, but counterintuitive to any productive narratives about the attacks.

Conclusion

Despite Baraka’s work containing several instanced of problematic material, Baraka is still rightly entitled to his credit for his role in the Black Arts and Civil Rights movements. Baraka overcame the hardships and pain of life as a black American during the pre- and post-Civil Rights era and ended up contributing to one of the most impactful movements in modern western history. Baraka’s work should not be undermined due to some of it’s more problematic or extreme elements, rather these elements should be carefully analyzed to build a holistic narrative on an impactful figure.

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Annotated Bibliography of Poems

*An Agony. As Now.*

[*https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/52777/an-agony-as-now*](https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/52777/an-agony-as-now) *Source: The Dead Lecturer (Grove/Atlantic Inc., 1964)*

This poem talks about How he feels trapped inside his own body, and how he feels that he doesn't even know his own life. Braka compares his body to a cage made of hot metal that if he touched it would make him scream in pain.

Babylon Revisited

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/42559/babylon-revisited> Source: *Black Magic* (Bobbs-Merrill, 1969)

Balboa, the Entertainer

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/browse?contentId=28988> Source: *Poetry* (April 1962)

This poem talks about how you should live your life in a way that will leave an impact even if you feel that you have to stand alone in your endeavors. The last Stanza can be interpreted as “die soon” if your life's work ends before you do.

History as Process

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/browse?contentId=29930> Source: *Poetry* (April 1962)

Incident

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/42558/incident-56d2212863009> Source: *Black Magic* (Bobbs-Merrill, 1969)

This poem is from the perspective of a person who has just witnessed a murder. It has a fast and frantic energy in the beginning with three word sentences that just repeat the same information. As the poem goes on the speaker is able to speak more clearly and get full thoughts out as if they are calming down and we the audience get more information about this murder.

Legacy

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/42557/legacy-56d221281526a> Source: *Black Magic* (Bobbs-Merrill, 1969)

This poem shows the point of view of a black musician during this time period. It describes a state of moving to the next thing but knowing that it’s just more of the same ahead, and yet pressing on anyways.

The Liar

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/browse?contentId=29578> Source: *Poetry* (December 1963)

This Poem is written from the Perspective of Amiri and his feelings of self doubt brought on by his changing views on the world. Amiri was famously criticized for his opinions that would sometimes drastically change. So much so that at one point he felt he had changed so much that he changed his name. We can see that referenced in the end of this poem in the line “LeRoi is dead, I wonder who they mean.” as LeRoi was his original name.

Like Rousseau

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/29929/like-rousseau> Source: *The Poetry Anthology 1912-2002* (William Morrow & Company, Inc., 2002)

Jean-Jacques Rousseau is famous for reconceiving the social contract as a compact between the individual and a collective “general will” aimed at the common good and reflected in the laws of an ideal state and for maintaining that existing society rests on a false social contract that perpetuates inequality and rule by the rich.

This poem talks about Barak’s feelings on that “Social Contract” stopping people from saying what they truly want until they have held it in too long and the society needs to be torn down and built again if it is to be fair.

Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/58013/preface-to-a-twenty-volume-suicide-note> Source: *S O S: Poems, 1961-2013* (Grove/Atlantic Inc., 2015)

This Poem depicts a man who has fallen into a routine of his life and has also potentially begun to grow tired of it as we can see with the line “nobody sings anymore” as well as the extremely dark title of the poem. However in the end there may be a ray of hope the man finds in finding his daughter praying while alone in her room. During the 1960’s Amiri Baraka, at that point Leroi Jones, converted to Islam and changed his name to reflect his new life.

Short Speech to My Friends

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/58014/short-speech-to-my-friends>

This poem talks about black Americans after they successfully move into a city only to find similar extremely poor living conditions. There is a second part that talks about how people who could rise up to become “Heroes” often never do so out of fear of the positive and negative publicity it will bring them.

Snake Eyes

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/browse?contentId=29579>

This poem talks about the struggles of people who can barely scrape by on what they have and their struggles to keep going even when they are so low that breathing becomes a burden. It also talks about the gambits that they take to improve their status in life even though it may seem crazy to others.

Tender Arrivals

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/57883/tender-arrivals>

This is one of Amiris longer poems and also one of the most confusing with many metaphors and a lot of burp and fart references. He switches extremely quickly between talking hockey to dictators and then Roman Emperors. It talks about the chaos of life and the hypocrisy of people who will fight for ways of life while recoiling in disgust at the actions they fought for. All ending with the line, yesterday we explained language. Saying that these people should understand what they believe in but oftentimes they don’t.

Valéry as Dictator

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/29577/valery-as-dictator>

This Poem is about the impatiens Amiri feels towards his fight for civil rights, the poem asks why they wait for the promise of tomorrow when they know deep down that it will be the same until they decide that the “tomorrow” they are after will be today.