

COMMENT

On Amiri Baraka

Calling all black people
calling all black people, man woman child
Wherever you are, calling you, urgent, come in
Black people, come in, wherever you are, urgent, calling
you, calling all black people
calling all black people, come in, black people, come
on in.

—Amiri Baraka, “SOS”

Dear Bosses and Tastemakers commenting with kid gloves on Amiri Baraka’s
SOS: Poems 1961–2013:

The recent, posthumous collection of Amiri Baraka’s ruthlessly beautiful and piercing and visceral poetry, edited by Paul Vangelisti and published last year by Grove Press, opens with an air of urgently festive exclusivity: the title track above beseeches union, revival meeting, impromptu festival—a true point of entry into the nature and texture of Baraka’s work, his life, and his legacy. Dwight Garner’s January 2015 review of the work fails to take into account the intensity of Baraka’s commitment to this love call. Baraka’s intentions, as a writer and as a man, are clear and unflinching: his first fidelity is to those whom he considers his people, including all people—especially but not only black people—beleaguered by the incessant struggle for equality against the obstacles that race and/or class jut out in front of them. He was loyal to this purpose even at the expense of his own ego. The consequence, from mainstream critics like Garner and establishment papers like the *Times*, is the tacit effort to undermine his work and message by way of too much hype and emphasis on his politics. The myopic focus here is always on statements Baraka made or ideas he championed or deployed as bait, particularly when he was a young man, without recognizing their origin in his frustration

An appreciation and defense of Amiri Baraka, *SOS: Poems 1961–2013*, edited by Paul Vangelisti (New York: Grove Press, 2014). xxviii + 532 pp. \$30. Adapted from an unpublished letter to the editor of *The New York Times* in response to Dwight Garner’s review of the same book (“Poetic Voice Wrapped Tight in Its Shifting Politics,” 27 January 2015).

with the failure of the American promise, or their role in his active search for the equilibrium and the wisdom of experience to assuage that frustration. To honor the work presented throughout *SOS* is to review it with as much candor as Baraka himself had, and to remain as mercilessly eye-to-eye as he was, in the precarious and self-effacing stance he needed to enter to create the work, to be as generous as he was in that way.

SOS is the collection of poems I wish I had encountered on a syllabus as an undergraduate at Berkeley, where instead I was asked to read the most polite black poets in the canon, or even in high school, when I scoured the canon for any semblance of a black-and-tan fantasy I could identify with. As Baraka knew too well, academic institutions are still often devoid of truly vanguard or rebellious black voices: or when they include them, they do so in murmur only. It was in a seminar taught by Margo Jefferson, during my first semester as an MFA student at Columbia, that I read Baraka's short story "The Screamers" and was reawakened to the sense that black lives matter in literature. Baraka's work struck me with its unapologetically Afrocentric and soulcentric tone, humbly honest at the expense of glamor—until the sheer truth becomes glamorous. That tone was there in the bravely original and vernacular prose of "The Screamers." It reminded me to work with what matters to me, with or without permission.

In his subtly dismissive review, Garner reduces Baraka to sound bites by citing his more incendiary lines: for instance, "I've slept with almost every / mediocre colored woman / on 23rd street." Many lines from "The Screamers" seem to do a similar kind of thing: "But my father never learned how to drink," Baraka writes in a moment of autobiographical vulnerability. Taken in context, lines like this one reveal a key strain in Baraka's work and consciousness. He gave our literature something valuable with his ability to render the political and the poetic reciprocal by way of the deeply and often unflatteringly personal. These lines and tones manage to capture the tender disappointment that sometimes *is* what love is at its most enduring or least deluded.

The meaning and value of the political in Baraka's work needs to be understood in this context. Throughout his poetry, Baraka projects his own feelings of inadequacy onto his most intimate relationships—with lovers, with his father, and with his own selves. On all of these targets, he continually shifts and recenters blame and praise. So too with his ideologies. Contrary to what Garner suggests in his review, the so-called politics of Amiri Baraka are a form of praise, a softness and opening into his work rather than a barricade or bitterness. They represent his deepest vulnerability. He was constantly riffing with his own ideas while championing their imagined opponent as a sort of fabalistic necessity. Take the short poem "Red Eye," from *Black Magic* (1969), which ends with these lines:

We are at the point where death is too good for us. We are
in love with the virtue of evil. This communication. Rapping
on wet meat windows, they spin in your head, if I kill you
will not even have chance to hate me

If I kill you will not even have [the] chance to hate me. This statement has Baraka ventriloquizing what the poem's first line indicts as the "corrupt madness of the individual." Taking up the positions of both the indictment and its target is precisely what enables Baraka to overcome that "madness," to get outside himself in a political sense. Political ideology allowed Baraka to define himself and to revere forces greater than himself. It was also a means of working through a savior complex with an acute and endlessly probing sense of beauty, truth, and justice. He used the political to access the beauty and truth that the world around him tried to mute and coerce into nonexistence.

Like the clarion call of the poem "SOS" that opens the collection, Vangelisti's preface is raw, honest, and to the point. As Vangelisti explains, "Amiri remained a hard figure to approach, particularly for a literary establishment positioned somewhere between Anglo-American academicism and the entertainment industry." Vangelisti frames Baraka's work and career in a way that anticipates and disarms critics like Garner, who have been offended by Baraka's seamlessness as man and as poet because they have taken the poetics of his existence so literally that they discount his humanness and humaneness. The body of work offered in this collection is that of a rare breed of man and griot and hero poet of the Black American pantheon, talented enough to perform his beliefs as well on the page as in waking, walking life.

Baraka's seamlessness—his ability to integrate his behavior with his deepest truths in the moment and in the poems—offended many. And that is partly because Amiri was an equal-opportunity critic: no one got by him in art or in life. Black, white, Jew, gentile, woman, even, say, a hero of his own—everyone was a poem and potential fodder on his wings. It's also because of the tendency and desire among many mainstream white critics to neatly define, box in, and commodify the talents and personalities of black artists. It seems as if every black artist with a consciousness extending far past his or her primary craft gets assailed for the power they possess. This critical fate reaches across the pantheon: from Miles Davis, of whom Baraka said (in his brilliant "Obituary for Miles Davis"), "I'm one of your children"; to Theloniou Monk, so laconic he becomes an easy target for lore; to Nina Simone, a friend of Baraka's who once admitted, "The protest songs ruined my career"; to Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X, who in their rhetorical craft are just as much artists as they are thinkers, and above all martyrs to their originality.

For his part, Baraka was able to weave art and life together in such a way that seeing him at a jazz show in New York was equivalent to reading his lines. A lapse in quality or artistry was never a part of this seamlessness, despite the critical animus against Baraka when he wrote poems articulating truthfully, honestly, and openly the complexities of his worldview. Rather, the problem was and is that we often lack the bravery ourselves as critics to meet that gaze and feel, as Baraka put it, the “rays/raise/raze”—and the rage—of the certainty with which this eye-to-eye stance commits us to a struggle for justice.

Rather than oversimplify the writing throughout *SOS* by rebuking its ability to be both warm and cold in the same gesture, passionate and ambivalent, political and fugitive, read this work for spirit. Forget that jittery impulse to territorialize or place it somewhere familiar, and instead be transported, lifted, and re-educated in what poetry can accomplish when it embraces and dances in step with, rather than fears, its shadow. Know that “these clown gods / are words,” as Baraka has it in “From an Almanac” (1961), reminding us that we must both trust and mistrust his work’s animism, and follow the music of it past petty moral judgments. I’ve slept beside every nervously polite Amiri imitator, would-be, or wannabe on Front Street, and even in spite of his own complicated take on the feminine, it’s Baraka’s volume on the nightstand. “A political art, let it be / tenderness,” from the poem “Short Speech to My Friends” (1964), shows the beauty and self-awareness Baraka wanted to face his public with. Decades later, in “Buddha Asked Monk” (1995), Baraka posed a self-probing question: “If you were always right / would it be easier / or more difficult / living in the world?” That question opens up space for the poet, any poet, to be raw and human without fear of moral judgment. Read *SOS* in celebration of the fact that through these poems, and past the tired, oversimplified controversies they sometimes excite, Amiri Baraka lives in the world. Amiri Lives.

Harmony Holiday