

INTRODUCTION

THE  
FORECAST  
IS HOT!

REVOLUTION  
AGAINST  
WHITENESS

SURREALIST  
WOMEN

BLUES &  
THE POETIC  
SPIRIT

MEMPHIS  
MINNIE'S  
BLUES

SURREALIST  
EXPERIENCES

WHO NEEDS  
THE WTO?

IMAGES OF  
DESIRE

POETRY

TIME-TRAVELERS  
POTLATCH

REVIEWS

RELATED  
LINKS

BLACK SWAN  
PRESS/  
SURREALIST  
EDITIONS

*NOTE: The following collective declaration, "Poetry Matters: On the Media Persecution of Amiri Baraka," was originally issued by the Surrealist Movement in the U.S. in October 2002. Posted on this website and rapidly copied onto other sites, it attracted the attention of many—poets, writers, artists, musicians, and activists—who wrote in to affirm their agreement with it. As the number of supporters grew, it was decided to re-issue the statement with signatures.*

*In a bleak, jingoistic time when civil rights and liberties are increasingly jeopardized, this "Declaration of the 131" signifies that those for whom poetry really matters have refused to surrender to the authoritarian and militaristic trend. In demonstrating their solidarity with a fellow poet under reactionary attack, the signers of "Poetry Matters" are also affirming their passion for human liberty, the inalienable rights of the imagination, and free speech for all.*

## POETRY MATTERS!

### On the Media Persecution of Amiri Baraka

Poetry Festivals don't usually trigger hate campaigns or Red Scares, but this year's Geraldine Dodge Poetry Festival at Waterloo Village in Stanhope, New Jersey, proved to be different. There, on September 19th, Amiri Baraka read his poem "Somebody Blew Up America." The applause was thunderous, but some people apparently didn't like it, for almost immediately the poet was singled out for an incredible barrage of vilification by Murdoch's Fox News, *The New York Times*, the *National Review*, and scores—by now probably many hundreds—of bigoted, neoconservative, white-supremacist talk-shows and periodicals. Leading the assault on the poet is the so-called Anti-Defamation League (ADL), a powerful right-wing political organization notorious for its virulent opposition to Affirmative Action and for its routine use of character assassination against its critics.

It so happens that Baraka wrote "Somebody Blew Up America" in September/October 2001, in the weeks following the tragedy known to all as "9-11." The 226-line poem was promptly posted on the Internet, copied onto many websites, and further publicized by the poet at numerous well-attended readings all over the U.S. and in many other countries. It quickly became one of the most widely circulated of his works. No attempt was made to conceal the fact that the poem was, in Baraka's own words, "an attack on Imperialism, National Oppression, Monopoly Capitalism, Racism, Anti-Semitism," and that it was meant to "probe and disturb." Not until the Dodge Poetry Festival, however, did anyone object to it.

What provoked the sudden media war on Amiri Baraka in September 2002? Assuredly it was not merely a difference of opinion regarding the art of poetry. In truth, despite the hue and cry, the poem itself is not the central issue here. In any event, the principal charge alleged against the poem (that it is "anti-Semitic") cannot withstand a moment's critical examination. Indeed, with its salute to the memory of such revered Jewish revolutionists as Rosa Luxemburg, and the questions it raises about U.S. capitalism's little-known complicity in the Holocaust, Baraka's poem is explicitly *against* anti-Semitism and all racism. If the ADL's hollow charge, repeated *ad nauseam* by the media, had even the slightest substance, how are we to account for the fact that it was completely unnoticed by the hundreds of thousands who had read or heard the poem during the preceding year? (The ADL, of course, construes any and all criticism of the Israeli government—even the merest mention of its long support of South African Apartheid, for example—as "anti-Semitic.")

No less spurious is the ADL's puerile argument that Baraka's poem is helping to foment "anti-American xenophobia," but this charge—bristling with sinister insinuations—does bring us closer to the real issues at stake in the media "police action" against the poet. For what the ADL, neoconservatives and repentant ex-New-Leftists really hate about Baraka is that he is a sharp critic of this country's anti-democratic institutions, and an activist who has time and again protested the U.S. government's repressive role in foreign and domestic affairs. Worse yet, from the point of view of the white ruling class and the politicians who do its bidding, Baraka is also an outspoken *revolutionary*.

Clearly, then, the real target of the ADL's ongoing defamation of the author of "Somebody Blew Up America" is not that particular poem, or any other poem, but *the poet himself*, his revolutionary courage and audacity, and above all his ability to articulate the anxieties and yearnings of those "furthest down" in humankind's long hard struggle against inequality and tyranny.

The question, "Why did the assault on the poet start as late as September 2002?" is easily answered: Because in August, a few weeks before the Dodge Poetry Festival, Amiri Baraka became the poet laureate of the State of New Jersey. An honorary title with a small stipend, this was far from a position of power, but for the state's corrupt "business-as-usual" Establishment, it was evidently way too much.

And so Baraka's poem—or rather, the distorted, out-of-context fragments quoted by his critics in the press and on TV—was made a pretext for racial and political persecution by that arch-enemy of all poetry, solidarity, and freedom: the white power structure.

The ADL and other bigots are demanding that Baraka be removed as poet laureate. Cravenly submitting to white-supremacist pressure-groups, New Jersey Governor James E. McGreevey has formally asked the poet not only to resign as laureate, but also to apologize for his poem! Baraka has refused.

In the current U.S. political climate: a climate of domination, fear, and insipid conformism; increasing government surveillance and curtailing of civil rights and liberties; persecution of immigrants, radicals, and organized labor; massive militarization and flag-waving war hysteria, all promoted by an unelected President and a billionaire-owned media—the assault on Amiri Baraka is a matter of the greatest concern to all who care about human freedom, the right to dream, and the right to speak out.

This attack on a poet is an attack on all poets, all poetry, and all free speech. The persecution of Baraka is about *stifling* poetry, suppressing criticism, silencing voices of dissent. It is about censorship and coercion; the imposition of conformity and misery; the denial of freedom.

Unalterably opposed to all forms of bigotry, we say:

Hands Off Amiri Baraka!

Long live the unfettered imagination!

An injury to One is an injury to All!

#### **For the Surrealist Movement in the United States:**

Gale Ahrens, Jennifer Bean, Jen Besemer, Daniel Boyer, Ronnie Burk, Richard Burrke, Susan Burke, Dennis Cooper, Laura Corsiglia, Jayne Cortez, Schlechter Duvall, Mel Edwards, Joseph Allen Fees, Sarah Frances, Brandon Freels, Beth Garon, Paul Garon, Robert Green, Jan Hathaway, Joseph Jablonski, Ted Joans, Robin D. G. Kelley, Don LaCoss, Mary Low, Tristan Meinecke, Casandra Stark Mele, Morgan Miller, Anne Olson, Ruth Oppenheim-Rothschild, Irene Plazewska, David R. Roediger, Larry Romano, Franklin Rosemont, Penelope Rosemont, M. K. Shibek, Louise Simons, Tamara L. Smith, Debra Taub, Jordan West, Joel Williams.

**The following individuals—poets, writers, artists, musicians, teachers, editors, and activists— have expressed their solidarity with the foregoing statement, and asked to have their signatures added to it:**

Ernest Allen, Ron Allen, Miekal And, Derrick Bell, Max Blechman, Stephanie Booher, Doreen C. Bowens, John Bracey, Lisa Brock (School of the Art Institute, Chicago), Dennis Brutus, Paul Buhle, Ed Bullins, Vinie Burrows (Permanent UN rep for Women's Int'l Democratic Federation), Carolyn A. Butts (*African Voices Magazine*), Alexander Cockburn, Polly A. Connelly (organizer, United Auto Workers, ret.), Maria Damon (University of Minnesota), Susan G. Davis, Dave Dellinger, Diane di Prima, Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, Howard Dyckoff, Patricia Eakins (ed., *Frigate: The Transverse Review of Books*), Katie Eppich, Torvald Faegre, DuEwa M. Frazier (CEO, Lit Noire Publishing), Chris Funkhouser, Nicole Henares Garland, John Higginson, Steve Garabedian, Regie Gibson, Stephanie Gilman, Maurice Greenia, Jr., Michael Gregory, Tyree Guyton, Mary Ann Hansen, Elaine Harger (*Progressive Librarian*), James V. Hatch, Patrick Herron, Herbert Hill, Amy Hufnagel, Noel Ignatiev, Michael James (*Heartland Journal*), Joseph Jarman, Carolyn Karcher, Marie Kazalia, Carlos Cortéz Koyokuikatl, Joel Kovel, Kari Lydersen, Harry Magdoff (co-editor, *Monthly Review*), Clive Matson, Deborah Meadows (Calif. Polytechnic State U., Pomona), David Meltzer, Naeema Muhammad (Black Workers for Justice, NC), Saladin Muhammad (Black Workers for Justice, NC), Sheila Nopper, Mark Nowak (ed., *XCP: Cross Cultural Poetics*), Rob O'Brien (ed., *ache magazine*), Alix Olson, Jim O'Neal (founding ed., *Living Blues*), Simon J. Ortiz, Martin Paddio, Robert Penny (founder, Kuntu Writers' Workshop, Pittsburgh), Eric Perkins, Elizabeth Peterson, Utah Phillips, Peter Rachleff, Margaret Randall, Adrienne Rich, Henry Rosemont, Jr., JoAnn Rosemont, Mark Rosenzweig (Councilor at Large, American Library Association), John Ross, Ron Sakolsky, Sonia Sanchez, Archie Shepp, John J. Simon, John Sinclair, James Smethurst, Gary Snyder, John Starrs, Nelson Stevens, John Stevenson, William Strickland, Rodrigo Toscano, Askia Touré, Tony Menelik Van Der Meer, Joseph Verilli, Lise Vogel (Rider University, Lawrenceville, NJ), Darryl Lorenzo Wellington, Christopher Winks.