

That’s Where Sarah Vaughn Lives’’: Amiri Baraka, Newark, and the Landscape and Soundscape of Black Modernity

by

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We are being told of the greatness
of Western Civilization
Yet Europe
is not the West

Leave England headed West
you arrive
in Newark,

--Amiri Baraka, "I Am"¹

Amiri Baraka was the poet-laureate of New Jersey, but his deepest connection to the state was to the relatively small, densely populated portion comprising the city of Newark, where he lived the majority of his life. What is notable about the soundings and representations of the black neighborhoods of Newark in Baraka's poetry, fiction, criticism, drama, and (especially) autobiographical narrative is the way he consistently remained committed to depicting the social, cultural, historical, and geographical particularities of the city while portraying Newark after the onset of the Great Migration as representative of the struggles, strengths, and weaknesses of urban African American communities, of a black nation, in general.

Here, I want to consider the importance of Newark in Baraka's work as an embodiment of the black modern that he posed against more restrictive (and politically conservative) notions of "high modernism," especially those enshrined in the New Criticism, and against more depoliticized and whitened versions of bohemia, as well as what followed this modernity. By the black modern and black modernity,² I mean Baraka's vision of the creation of a black industrial working class and working class experience and culture in the wake of the Great Migration from the South. This was a class forged by industrial and urban organization, exploitation, racism, and struggle against class and racial exploitation. By "what comes after modernism," I suppose one might say something like "postmodernism," but Baraka himself rejected that term as an academic obfuscation or abstracting of the actual experience of people. Rather I refer to Baraka's sense of what scholars such as Thomas Sugrue have termed the "urban crisis" of deindustrialization vividly seen practically everywhere in Newark and the assaults of what many would term the "neo-liberal" regime, but which Baraka would much more call "imperialism" or "capitalism." In particular, it will focus on how the cultural geography and history of Newark informed Baraka's positing of a popular avant-garde continuum of black culture and politics, a formulation that Baraka saw as issuing from a black modernist tradition significantly issuing from Langston Hughes and Sterling Brown, but with a Jersey accent, so to speak.

The first black mayor of Newark (and a major East Coast city) Kenneth Gibson, probably under the influence of Baraka, placed Newark firmly in the U.S. urban vanguard during his 1970 election campaign, "Wherever American cities are going, Newark will get there first."³ Given the demographics of Newark in 1970 (African Americans were about 60% of the population, if a smaller portion of the electorate), Gibson was really talking about a black vanguard. Despite their later break with Gibson, Baraka and his Committee for a United Newark (which morphed into the Newark chapter of the Congress of African People) were the architects of Gibson's election. Gibson's visionary rhetoric here was based both in Baraka's sense of Newark as a "New Ark," which obviously riffed on the biblical ark and less obviously (to non-Newarkers) reproduced the way that black southern migrants pronounced the name of the city (as opposed to white Newarkers, who typically said something closer to "Nerk"), and as a typical modern and a postmodern, postindustrial landscape. In short, it was near, but not New York. The Central Ward, the historic center of black Newark where Baraka's center, Spirit House, was located on Stirling Street, was not Harlem or the South Side or even the Shaw district of Washington, D.C.

Baraka famously wrote in the poem “Return of the Native” that “Harlem is vicious modernism,”⁴ but really, I believe, he was thinking of Newark displaced onto Harlem there. Newark is the last major stop on the old Pennsylvania Railroad from the South before New York City. It was a city of about 450,000 at the time of Baraka’s birth in 1934. It was an industrial city about three or four decades past its industrial prime, but still with enough factories and service jobs to provide employment to a black community with very old roots, but which had grown exponentially with a huge southern migration in the early decades of the twentieth century. It was and long remained a famously corrupt city where organized crime, especially Jewish- and Italian-led gangs, had tremendous political and economic influence. The formal political establishment was largely dominated by the Irish until the early 1960s, when they were displaced, relatively briefly, by the Italians. (This ethnic landscape of black, Jewish, Italian, and Irish greatly marked Baraka’s writing, particularly in the 1960s and 1970s.) Large numbers of Poles, Ukrainians, other smaller groups of Eastern and Southern European descent were significant parts of the industrial working class of Newark during Baraka’s youth augmented by a rapidly growing Puerto Rican community in the 1940s and 1950s. While in many respects Newark would increasingly become a semi-Southern city as the black community grew, it was still an urban place where, in Baraka’s estimation, the culture, the sensibilities, and the history of rural black South were transformed, though certainly not destroyed by an encounter with industry and a multiracial and multinational industrial working class, in which black modernity was expressed significantly through music. The blues remained the conduit that maintained the contact between South and North, between country and city:

“The blues would come into these cities and take over whole neighborhoods, not to mention horns and pianos and the rap of the drum always been there. Rap rap rap rap, drummer rappin. Like “I rather drink muddy water an’ sleep in a hollow log.” “Why, you ain’t even in New York, boy. This year’s New Ark.”...⁵

However, the new urban life and industrial organization that Baraka sees as embodied in the “Brick City” of Newark, called for new sorts of organization, technologies, forms, aesthetics, and even modes of response:

We had give up the Spanish guitar for the industrial one, the urban worker's guitar that needed electricity to tell its tale. In my generation we came up with the rise of rhythm and blues, the big-city blues of screaming horns and endless riffs. The big bands were actually big blues bands, and even the jazz bands were blues bands that also had another kind of story, one that included deeper histories and music so heavy it could call on an ology if it needed to explain itself.”⁶

For Baraka, Newark becomes not only a beachhead of black modernity, but a black artistic modernism, again growing out of music, the blues, gospel, r & b, and jazz. It is not only that black Newark was an important locus of jazz and r & b, from the days of the ragtime and stride piano of Willie “The Lion” Smith, James P. Johnson, and Fats Waller in Newark’s “Coast” black entertainment district near Lincoln Park through the r & b and jazz of the Sultans, Hank Mobley,

Sarah Vaughn and Little Jimmy Scott to the new jazz of Grachan Monchur and Wayne Shorter, but it was, as William Harris points out, the African American urban space where Baraka encounters a broader radical African American aesthetic sensibility.⁷ Even if Baraka did not always recognize those radical aesthetics as such during the moment and if the music did not necessarily originate in Newark, that is where he found it and so was for him integral to his development and to the meaning of black Newark as he used it as a touchstone of his art. It was both a particular place with its own history, geography, pantheon of local cultural heroes, and venues (or even juke boxes) where one might hear or sometimes see a national hero, such as Dinah Washington or Louis Jordan, and a typical topos of black modernity in a way that Harlem could never be:

Saturday afternoons the whole of The Hill was music. Up top the blues, all kinds, country and city, guitars and saxophones, screamers and moaners. I dug the Ravens, the Orioles, Amos Milburn, Dinah Washington, Little Esther, Ruth Brown was our heartbeat, Larry Darnell, Louis Jordan and His Tympany Five, Earl Bostic, Tab Smith. It was everywhere everywhere in that space, in the air, on the walls, in the halls, in the laundromats, whistled and sung and stomped to. It colored the vacant lots where barbecue was being perfected, it zoomed out of the bars and lit up our mouths, it bluesed us along through those gray streets and carried the message and feeling of black life.

Cause Newark was iron gray for me then and it is still but now ripped apart by piled-up despair. But in those days gray and steel were its thrusts into me, its dominant unwavering tone. And the strongest the deepest the basic construction element of its design was the black of its bottom of the lives whose majority it held and spoke for. Such an ugly place, so hard so unyielding it seemed -- gray industrial city. But black life made it blue. Its beating heart was blue therefore rooted in black life and its streets strummed my head like a guitar.⁸

As Harris notes in Baraka's description of a black communal response to saxophonist Jay McNeely's honking in the short story "The Screamers," "The music is the instrument of extreme art and revolt, features Baraka incorporated into his own art."⁹ For Baraka, that initiation into the radical aesthetic politics of black music, a politics that Baraka would spend much of his career explicating and elaborating, is integrally tied to the Third (Central) Ward of Newark.

Similarly, what was Baraka's deepest early transformation through his encounter with bebop took place within the context of black Newark:

I want to explain how much BeBop changed me. I was still in the Central Ward, up over the oil-heater Polish couple, and could look down on Belmont Avenue weekends and see slick folks strut and drunks stagger into the Chinese restaurant for some chow mein. I was still going to the canteen on Sundays, and the National, and hanging out most times with the Hillside.

But now some other kinds of yearnings turned me around. I wanted to go to some other kinds of places, and usually by myself. Not because I suddenly felt "estranged" from people or what not. But because BeBop, "The Music," had got into me and was growing in me and making me hear things and see things. I began to want things. I didn't even know what.

And I wasn't even sure what the music was. BeBop. A new language a new tongue and vision for a generally more advanced group in our generation. BeBop was a staging area for a new sensibility growing to maturity. And the BeBoppers themselves were blowing the sound to attract the growing, the developing, the about-to-see. Sometimes even the players was carrying out the end of another epoch as they understood it. Though they knew they was making change, opening a door, cutting underbrush and heavy vines away to make a path. And where would that path lead? That was the real question. It is the real question of each generation. Where will the path you've shown us lead? And who will take it?¹⁰

In other words, it is through bebop in Newark, that Baraka begins to get a glimpse of what a black avant-garde might be, one, he emphatically declares, is not predicated on an alienation from the community, but is rather an opening to new things, new possibilities, freedom really, while remaining connected to the community. This sort of avant-garde or vanguard approach or sensibility that he senses almost intuitively through his growing attachment to bebop in Newark is one that he will have to relearn during and after his tenure with the downtown bohemia of New York City that was far more attached to alienation and estrangement.

I should add here that this sort of encounter is not limited to music, but also includes other art forms, including literature. As Baraka said of Langston Hughes in a interview with Van Gosse:

He was a writer that I grew up with, in terms of black newspapers, and Langston was a possession of my own sensibility from the very beginning. I never had to look for Langston Hughes. He was very present even in a little town like Newark, which is hardly a literary town, but still I had continuous evidence that there was a colored poet in Langston Hughes.¹¹

One is reminded here of the black Cleveland poet Russell Atkins's claim that there is a line of U.S. modernism descended from the work Langston Hughes.¹² If one thinks about the different strands of what became known as the "New American Poetry," a concept of artistic filiation that Baraka did much to bring into being, one of the primary things they had in common is that they were revaluations and reconsiderations of the modernist heritage that were quite at odds from the New Critics (and the New York Intellectuals), even if the modernist artists and tendencies to which they were drawn varied (e.g., whether one was into Pound, Williams, the Reverdy, Mayakovsky, Eluard, and so on). While Baraka was notable in that he was engaged with all the strands of the counterculture (and many of their enthusiasms), he came to take seriously Atkins's proposition of a modernism descended from Hughes—and Hughes's longtime

version of what Baraka in the Black Arts era came to call the “changing same” of African American culture, from African through the spirituals, blues, early jazz, swing, and bebop to free jazz. Of course, those familiar with Baraka’s work and his assessment of African American literature and culture, particularly in his later career, are aware of his admiration and sense of relationship to Hughes, particularly from the 1970s on, but what I want to point out is Baraka’s assertion here (and elsewhere) that Hughes and the Hughes line of modernism is something he got first in Newark, through black Newark.

Baraka also used Newark as a locus of what might be thought of a certain kind of black post-modernity or black post-neo-liberalism if you will—even though I’m not overly enamored with either the terms postmodernism or neo-liberalism. By this I mean, that Newark (even before Detroit) became for Baraka (and the popular media to a large extent) an embodiment of the failure of modernity. This failure is not simply a spiritual, psychological, or aesthetic failure that we often link to “high” modernist critiques of modernity—after all, Baraka had a deep attachment to popular African American cultural forms of the high industrial era all his life. The failure is primarily economic and political. The factories are gone or going fast; the educational system is in ruins (and in the hands of racist outsiders); the infrastructure of the city is severely decayed; the health care system serves black Newarkers incredibly poorly; and so on. As portrayed in the popular media aimed primarily at white Americans, Newark becomes the landscape of the old story of black failure, with a somewhat new terminology (e.g., “thugs,” “black on black crime,” and so on). For Baraka, it is the landscape of the abject failure of capitalism for black people in the first place and working people generally. One thinks of the double meaning of Kenneth Gibson’s pronouncement about Newark and the future of U.S. cities. That is to say, the future of Newark and by extension the urban masses of black America has to be found in the future, not the past. Or rather, Newark’s only hope is in a possible, revolutionary future that will have to be significantly determined by black people. Again, it is through a recollection, a remembering of radical black art in the form of John Coltrane’s music fairly early in his long Marxist period that Baraka is able to access such a revolutionary optimism:

(I lay in solitary confinement, July 67
Tanks rolling thru Newark
& whistled all I knew of Trane
my knowledge heartbeat
& he was *dead*
they
said.
And yet last night I played *Meditations*
& it told me what to do
Live, you crazy mother
fucker!
Live!
& organize
yr shit
as rightly
burning!¹³

Again, it is in Newark (to which Baraka has returned from New York after the implosion of BARTS) that his this transformative encounter or reencounter with the black avant-garde, post-bebop, post-Hughes (who died the year of the Newark uprising) vanguard sounded by the music of John Coltrane takes place here. Similarly, the significance of such Newark identified musicians as James P. Johnson, Hank Mobley, and Grachan Moncur, each representing a different historical moment and mode of black jazz, being included in the sonic background of segments of Baraka's late epic poem of African American history and culture, *Wise, Why's Y* presents Newark as a key site of the "changing same" of black culture and consciousness.

In short, for most of Baraka's career as expressed through many genres and media of art in which he work, the arc of black life and art in Newark traced the arc of black modernity and the black revolutionary tradition. While Newark was Baraka's hometown where he lived the vast majority of his life and for which he had an abiding affection, its importance in his work and his version of black modernity and what came after that modernity (whatever you want to call it—again, something like imperialism is probably what he would have preferred) was not because of its uniqueness, but its typicality. It was not Harlem; it was not the capital of the Negro World; it was not the Apple. It was really epitome of the blues people; it was the industrial center where a rural people became transformed into something new with very old roots, a new sort of nation within a nation—a continuum that was especially embodied in black music; it was a landmark of the abject failure of capitalism, especially for black people, a failure that called for a revolution, a New Ark.

Notes

¹ Amiri Baraka, *Funk Lore: New Poems, 1984-1995*. (Richmond, California: Littoral Books, 1996), 40.

² Dennis Büscher-Ulbrich, "Interview with Amiri Baraka, *Jacket 2* (January 9, 2014): <http://jacket2.org/interviews/baraka-2010>.

³ Chanta L. Jackson, "Newark Panel to Examine the Legacy of Ken Gibson, *Newark Star-Ledger* (October 5, 2009).

⁴ Baraka, *The LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka Reader* (New York: Morrow), 217.

⁵ Amiri Baraka, *The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka* (New York: Freudlich Books), 55.

⁶ Baraka, *Autobiography*, 56.

⁷ William J. Harris, "Amiri Baraka's Adventures with the Out & the Gone" *Callaloo* 37.3 (Summer 2014): 484.

⁸ Baraka, *Autobiography*, 44.

⁹ Harris, 484.

¹⁰ Baraka, *Autobiography*, 58.

¹¹ Van Gosse, "Home Rules: An Interview with Amiri Baraka" *Radical History Review* 87 (2003): 118.

¹² Russell Atkins, "The Invalidity of Dominant-Group 'Education' Forms for 'Progress' for Non-Dominant Ethnic Groups as Americans." *Free Lance* 7.2 (1963): 32.

¹³ Amiri Baraka, *LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka Reader*, 271-272.