

Dedication of Light to Amiri Baraka

You dream of meeting certain people. Amiri Baraka was on my bucket list. When I decided to create a Black Arts Movement Conference at UC Merced, the truth was it was an opportunity to meet my Heroes and Sheroes. Marvin X, the west coast co-founder of the Black Arts Movement asked Amiri to come to UC Merced, and he immediately said yes, as did Ishmael Reed, Eugene Redmond, Jerry Varnardo, Jimmy Garrett, Umar Bin Hassan, Askia Toure, Genny Lim, Emory Douglas, Billy X. Jennings, Adilah Barnes, Tarika Lewis, Avotcja, Charlotte “Mama C” O’Neal, Nathan Hare, Cecil Brown, and a host of other Black Arts Movement and Black Power luminaries. Why did they come to a small city in California’s San Joaquin Valley? This may seem farfetched, but it was about community. A feeling of belonging to something greater, a distant space in time that spoke of revolution, the liberation of a colonized people, and the need to connect. Many of the writers, activists, and artists had not seen each other in over forty years but connected through the pain, the hope, and the belief that they had a mission, the liberation of African Americans from oppression. Askia Toure spoke to students at UC Merced stating, “We let you down. It is up to you to fulfill what we tried to do.” Toure spoke as a freedom fighter, one who in the past went underground to survive. With Toure in this fight were Amiri Baraka, Sonia Sanchez, Larry Neal, and men and women who believed that they were in the midst of a revolution.

Amiri Baraka was committed to the March 2014 Black Arts Movement Conference. I asked if I could use his poem, “Black Art” in our flier. With the generosity of one born to the struggle, he said, “Use whatever poems you want.” I told Baraka from the minute I read *Dutchman*, I wanted to meet him. He was the light that shone in the mid-to-late twentieth century for Black playwrights. We wanted to hear and see our voices in the theatre. Baraka spoke to the importance of Black literature. He was our literary heaven on earth. Therefore, when Amiri fell ill, I kept praying that he would rise. Somewhere in my dreams, I saw him healthy and ready to speak about his work and his commitment to young artists. When I received the message on January 9, 2014, that he had passed, it was as if a light had gone out. The world had lost its color. Many said to postpone the conference. However, at Amiri’s Memorial, hosted by Danny Glover, they spoke of the conference and the beauty of Amiri’s work. Just like my correspondence with Baraka, his memorial was not something that I could reach out and touch. We corresponded through emails, but somehow in my creative imagination, he was there speaking to me, guiding me. I was also not at the memorial, but I felt in my bones that I was there as I sat in my home, honoring his passing and appreciating how much of a difference this man who I had never met, had made. Those attending the memorial included Maya Angelou, Sonia Sanchez, Pam Africa, Cornel West, Ras and Amina Baraka, and a host of supporters, friends, artists, and those that understood how important Amiri was to the struggle for Black self-determination. I pledged to spirit that this conference would be a tribute to his work and his memory.

On the day of the conference, March 1, 2014, I learned about unconditional love. It was rainy, but folks came from as far away as Italy. When the families from Italy were asked why they were there, they said, “Because this is history,” and that is exactly what happened: we made history. The two days became a gathering of family. Whether you were related or not, you were family.

This special issue of *Africology: The Journal of Pan African Studies* is dedicated to Amiri Baraka, Jayne Cortez, Wanda Coleman, Reginald Lockett, Larry Neal, and all those beautiful African-American cultural libraries that have become ancestors, guiding us towards a deeper understanding of the power and artistry of African Americans.

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