

Parity, Me and Amiri B.

Yvette Heyliger

Abstract

An uptown artist coming-of-age artistically, racially and politically after discovering the Black Arts Movement as an adult, is the journey of *Bridge to Baraka*, a solo play written and performed by Yvette Heyliger and featuring poetry of the late Amiri Baraka. Before the 1960's, the canon of American literature did not include diverse voices. The writers of the Black Arts Movement—the forerunners of multiculturalism—changed all that and we, the writers of today, are the beneficiaries. From her bourgeois lifestyle growing up during the racially volatile 1960's, to coming to terms with a European ancestry that rendered her “not Black enough to recite a Black poem,” Yvette X claims her birthright and builds a bridge to Baraka and the writers of the Black Arts Movement; writers who were the forerunners of multiculturalism and whose legacy to the melting pot was to tell their own stories, their own way, and to get those stories to the masses “by any means necessary.” This is the take-away from the Movement then and now. This take-away can be an inspiration to all artists but most especially to women playwrights who continue to face on-going lack of production opportunities in the American Theatre. How Heyliger builds a bridge of understanding and appreciation of the gift of Amiri Baraka's Black Arts Movement, and how it can empower artists today to keep fighting the good fight for visibility and opportunity, is at the heart of the universal message of this article and *Bridge to Baraka*.

Parity, Me and Amiri B.

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

This is an excerpt of a poem called, *SOS*, written by poet, playwright, activist and creator of the Black Arts movement, Amiri Baraka. When I first read the poem, I felt its pull but was hesitant to answer, not knowing if I could count myself as “one of the called.” I spent many years of my life—well into adulthood—trying to undo the notion that I was “not black enough.” *Parity, Me and Amiri B.* examines my evolution as an artist and how I came to claim

this “call” as my birthright; how through my newfound work as a solo performer I came to build a bridge to Baraka, whose Black Arts Movement unwittingly played a role in my comeuppance.

I had a relatively short but impactful stint early in my career in show business as an actor. My proverbial “fifteen-minutes-of-fame,” came as a result of having won the role of “Aunt Sarah,” Phylicia Rashad’s sister, on *The Cosby Show*. After many years now on the other side of the footlights writing, directing and producing for the theatre, I have stepped onto the stage again in my first solo play, *Bridge to Baraka*. The creation of this play has allowed me to pay homage to Amiri Baraka’s Black Arts Movement. This literary movement has inspired me to keep fighting the good fight in my quest to contribute to the canon of American arts and literature as a playwright and producing artist for the American theatre.

At the heart of *Bridge to Baraka* is a message that people of all stripes, especially women theatre artists, can take a page from: We are the beneficiaries of a short-lived, explosive and controversial, literary movement which can empower artists and civilians alike. I realized that I could be the bridge for this message through the creation of my solo show. That is the reason I named the play *Bridge to Baraka*. To be sidetracked by a few angry poems that were written in response to the volatile racial and political climate of the country at that time, is to miss the message of artistic freedom the Black Arts Movement has for us all of us in the new millennium. I was inspired and I knew that if I could gather inspiration from this Movement, then others might too. As my character, Yvette X explains, “I feel compelled to... build a bridge to Baraka and other writers of the Black Arts Movement on whose shoulders we all stand; writers who were the forerunners of multiculturalism and whose legacy to the melting pot was to tell their own stories, their own way, and to get those stories to the masses “by any means necessary.” However, I did not become this “bridge” overnight—but rather, over years.

Black History Music

In February of 1998, I traveled to Boston with Amiri Baraka and his musicians, a group called Blue Ark. At that time I was working as an associate producer for Woodie King, Jr.’s National Black Touring Circuit. Founded in 1974, the mission of the National Black Touring Circuit is “to make existing Black theatre productions available to a wider audience by presenting to Black communities at large, to colleges, to Black art centers, and to resident professional theatres.” Baraka was booked to perform *Black History Music* at Northeastern University at the invitation of Professor Ed Bullins, one of the most celebrated playwrights to emerge from the Black Arts Movement. In his book, *New Plays from the Black Theatre*, Bullins says of Baraka:

LeRoi has greatly influenced many young Black artists. I say without reservation that LeRoi is one of the most important, most significant figures in American Theatre. Hardly anybody realizes this now except Black playwrights and artists. We know that the Man (LeRoi) has changed theater in this country. His contribution to Black theatre will have a great effect on all theatre in this country...LeRoi Jones is one of the most significant figures in American, world and Black theater. He created me as a playwright and created many other young Black playwrights... (Bullins xv).

Although written in 1969, Bullins's quote rings as true today as it did then. Personally, it has been more the spirit of Baraka's Black Arts Movement, rather than Amiri Baraka himself, that has influenced my work as an artist and activist. But, the jury may still be out on that as I read and learn more about Baraka and his plays.

I feel blessed to have had an opportunity to meet Ed Bullins while working for the National Black Touring Circuit on *Black History Music*. As luck would have it, as associate producer, I was asked by the university to accompany Baraka and Blue Ark on the trip and to act as liaison (aka buffer) between the group and the university. I remember standing in the wings during the performance of *Black History Music* knowing it was an honor to see Amiri Baraka, a living legend, in action. I appreciated that I was witnessing history even though, at that time, I did not fully comprehend Baraka's poetry or artistry on any deep level. I later learned that Baraka "always thought [poetry] was supposed to be with music in the first place" (Pace). At the time, the closest I had come to this particular style of performance was the time I saw Gil Scott Heron perform at New York City's famed jazz club, Blue Note, in Greenwich Village. I did feel myself transported back in time to a particular performance style where poetry and music fed off each other, informed each other, existed because of each other but, like my experience with *Black History Music*, it was all a little over my head.

You see, I was a little girl in the 1960's. I lived a middle class, bourgeois lifestyle growing up, shielded from the rising black militancy of the times. My mother took my sisters and me to ballet, museums and to the theatre. The seeds of artistic hopes and dreams were planted in my sisters and me back then, blossoming later with our audition for and attendance to the first high school for the performing arts in Washington, DC, the Duke Ellington School of the Arts. Additionally, my earliest memories of blending art and activism are from my time at Duke Ellington. Circumstances, resulting from decisions made by a very conservative school board in reaction to the activities and functioning of the arts school, necessitated that I become an activist. The early marriage of arts and activism that began in high school, continued into adulthood and throughout my life as an artist.

Discovery of the Black Arts Movement

The genesis of my solo play, *Bridge to Baraka*, was the discovery of the Black Arts Movement during my tenure in Queens College MFA Creative Writing—Playwriting program. I already had two degrees under my belt, a Masters of Art and a Bachelors of Art, from New York University's Gallatin School of Individualized Study. As an adult who had been writing, directing and self-producing for the theatre for a number of years, I returned to graduate school seeking a "terminal" degree in the hopes of one day teaching on the college or university level. One of the electives I took in the first year of my MFA program (2008 – 2009) was called, "Conceptions of Selfhood in African American Literature." In addition to in-class discussion of the readings and turning in written responses to the work, students had to sign up to present on various related topics selected by the professor. I chose to present on the Black Arts Movement, a topic of which I had only a cursory knowledge.

What a blessing for me as an artist to have selected this particular topic on which to present! In doing the research to prepare for my presentation, I realized that I wasn't an anomaly in theatre history, standing alone with a message and no microphone as an artist. I was standing on the shoulders of the artistic warriors of the Black Arts Movement who, like me, possessed (or cultivated) an entrepreneurial spirit and the audacity to tell their own stories their own way, and to get those stories to the masses. This knowledge was life-changing. It

emboldened me, giving me a renewed strength, resolve, and desire to keep going as a producing artist. Soon, an opportunity would present itself whereby I could share, with fellow artists and audiences, the gift of the Black Arts Movement, positioned against the backdrop of my American story.

Solo Performance Art via Fieldwork

In 2010 I was selected for Uptown/Downtown, a performance art development program offered by the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council, The Field and the Harlem Arts Alliance. Uptown/Downtown performance participants met weekly to show work in development. This showing was then followed by non-directorial, moderated feedback known as “Fieldwork.” Fieldwork is a method developed to assist in the creation of new work. It protects and empowers artists to realize their vision and intention for their own work before the encroachment of outside opinions and direction. In Fieldwork it is believed that outside opinions and direction (though well-meaning) are often introduced too early in the development of the artist’s work and influences or worse, confuses, the artist’s own intention.

Fieldwork facilitator and theatre artist James Scruggs explains, “Over the past several years I have had the pleasure of facilitating Fieldwork, and helping to create a space where artists can develop, test, and take risks within their creation process. The non-judgmental feedback given to artists, by artists, has proven to be invaluable to the progression of the work being developed. The weekly meetings/showings allow for deep consideration and time, which many of us do not have in our busy city lives.” As a result of the six week Uptown/Downtown performance art workshop, I discovered and cultivated the character “Yvette X, Uptown Artist” who found her voice through the vehicle of my first one-woman show, *Bridge to Baraka*. Half of the workshops were held in Harlem and the other half in Lower Manhattan. The program culminated in a showing of these works-in-progress in both an Uptown and a Downtown venue.

Uptown/Downtown was a bit of an experiment in the sense that the idea was to put a group of “uptown” artists together with a group of “downtown” artists to see if something would happen. But, in this instance, geographical location as a factor and influence in the creation of art did not matter—not like it mattered during Amiri Baraka’s prophetic move from downtown to uptown after the assassination of Malcolm X. In *Bridge to Baraka* I proclaim that the birth of the Black Arts Movement “commenced with Baraka’s exodus from the integrated, pot-smoking bohemia that was Manhattan’s lower east side; to the militant, revolutionary call-to-arms to emancipate the Afro-American in Harlem—in other words, from downtown artist to uptown artist...” Both writing style, artistic and political outlook seem to me to be characterized very much by geographic location with that important move from one end of New York City to the other during one of the most hot-blooded periods in American history—but there was more to it than that. It was about “going home,” as producer Woodie King, Jr. and the late playwright Ron Milner explain in the Preface of their book *Black Drama Anthology*:

We say that if [black] theatre is to be, it must—psychically, mentally, aesthetically and physically—go home. We are sure you know now what we mean by going home psychically and mentally. But just in case there is still any confusion, let us try to run a short quick summary. By psychically we mean coming away from your dues-paying to all those “outside—i.e., white—influences” and going to the real, black, YOU by way of those

places, people, and experiences which began and had the most to do with the shaping of what is now yourself; we mean making works, theatre, out of that and, in doing it, extending and validating that particular psyche. By mentally we mean understanding that you and your experiences are, in time and history, collective repetitions, have been repeated and multiplied many times. So, as artists you are to try to find the terms and the pictures which will most simply clarify those experiences and that knowledge for the yous who do not, or could not, understand what is, or was, happening to them and to future yous who will need to be warned and directed in terms from inside that level we call blackness.

Going home aesthetically will follow naturally after those first two steps—since your aesthetics come out of your mental and psychic environment. So we won't go into the demand for new dynamics, for a new intensity of language and form that the material and the desired atmosphere will make on you, except to say that the further you go home, the more startlingly new and black the techniques become. Musicians are pointing that out to us.

Now, going home physically with the new theatre means just that. Probably we should have started here. For this new theatre must be housed in, sustained and judged by, and be a useable projection of and to, a black community (King and Milner ix).

What's Good for the Goose

Today I am a producing artist/activist who marries grassroots civic action with artistic action and I have been fighting for justice on a variety of fronts, big and small, ever since. It is interesting that throughout all my years of training as an artist, from high school to graduate school, there was never any mention of the fact that I would be entering an industry that held few opportunities for women. Fast forward to today, it is no secret that women theatre artists get less than 20% of production opportunities nationwide. Women of color get even less than half of that, and often experience at a greater intensity being undervalued and underfunded. I started to wonder, in the face of the ongoing plight of women in the American Theatre, what keeps me, an African American female playwright, going? What keeps me trying to make a life in the theatre?

I have been an advocate for the plight of women in the American theatre for some time as a member of, or having held a leadership position in: the Women's Initiative, made up of members of the Dramatists Guild, which identifies and addresses the challenges facing American women dramatists and develops and implements action steps to advance and sustain fairness, equality and gender parity for all dramatists; the League of Professional Theatre Women which promotes visibility and increases opportunities for women in the professional theatre; and 50/50 in 2020, a grassroots movement encompassing all theatre disciplines, created to raise awareness of the contribution of women in theatre, to achieve employment parity for

women theatre artists by the year 2020 (the 100th Anniversary of women's suffrage), and to track progress toward parity. Through my involvement with these groups and with the development of *Bridge to Baraka*, I realized I had stumbled on to subject matter that speaks to the times we are living in when women's issues are on the battleground of American politics. Women can take a lesson from the tactics employed at the time by artists through their work by, as Yvette X explains, "...educating the masses about politics and grassroots organizing through their plays, poetry, music and dance."

The power of theatre as a tool for social change has been my calling and a great inspiration to me. I am reminded of a play Baraka wrote that illuminates this method of educating the masses about politics that I found in Woodie King and Ron Milners, *Black Drama Anthology*. Entitled, *Junkies Are Full of (SHHH...)*, in this play Black Nationalists kill members of a white drug cartel called, "Cosa Nostra," who are in bed with the elected officials. Under orders to flood drugs into the community, Cosa Nostra keeps the black community distracted from grassroots organizing, voting in local elections, and being concerned about bettering their condition. In a shocking twist, the Black Nationalists overdose their black junkie/pusher/informant that has been doing the cartel's bidding. Wearing signs that say "Master" and "Slave," the junkie/pusher/informant and a dead Cosa Nostra member are hung from a light pole at a main street intersection for the entire community to see and learn from.

Reading *Junkies Are Full of (SHHH...)* helped me to understand Baraka's poem, *Black Art* better. I understood why Baraka attacked everyone else in the poem, but I didn't understand why he also was attacking black people. But clearly, anyone who was not supporting the Black Nationalist agenda was fodder for Baraka's work and would not be tolerated. As the Black Nationalist character Chuma in *Junkies Are Full of (SHHH...)* says, "It makes this difference, nigger. We tired of dope in this neighborhood. We tired of sick chumps like you poisoning our little brothers. We even tired of you poisoning yourself... 'cept you probably too sick to even dig that" (Baraka 17).

This play makes a bold statement and has a crystal clear social justice message for Black audiences. When it comes to lack of equal rights and opportunity for women dramatists, why not press the strategic social justice message tactics of the Black Arts Movement into service for parity for women playwrights—especially women of color? What's good for the goose on one issue of social justice is good for a gander when tackling other key social justice issues of our time.

Keep the Baby

Given the fact that the Amiri Baraka was heavily criticized for his blatant, unapologetic sexism and misogyny, one might wonder how I could glean any inspiration from him, or his Black Arts Movement, as a way to move the plight of woman theatre artists forward. The irony of this is not lost on me. In fact, I personally experienced Baraka's sexism as associate producer for the National Black Touring Circuit when coordinating travel and logistics for *Black History Music*. I couldn't help but wonder how any woman could survive in a professional relationship with him, much less a romantic one.

Enter Hettie Jones. It just so happened that during my tenure at Queens College I met Hettie Jones, first wife of Baraka and (as a result) outcast of her Jewish family, who was a visiting lecturer discussing her own work as a writer. I found her to be a generous and nurturing woman; in fact a dear woman, who seemed to me more like the proverbial Jewish mother, than the bad-ass wife of a Black Nationalist and revolutionary provocateur. During a lull in the Q &

A she announced that we could ask her anything we wished. To me, this was a straight-up invitation to ask her about her marriage to Baraka! I could not reconcile in my mind the picture of the Hettie that was standing in front of me, and the Baraka I had come to know through my brief stint with him and through his writings, some of which were laced in sexist and anti-Semitic sentiment. So I asked her about their union. Hettie smiled thoughtfully and said, “Those were different times. He was a different man.”

Even with these incidents, the sexism found in some of the writing of the Black Arts Movement or in the attitudes of some of the writers, is an issue I chose not to explore in my piece (although, if it is felt to be the “elephant in the room,” I might one day consider it). I do mention sexism, but only briefly when discussing the public reaction to the work of the Black Arts Movement. You see, I feel that there are “bigger fish to fry,” namely: identity, creativity, parity, and the Black Arts Movement’s own particular brand of empowerment. *Bridge to Baraka* is laser focused on this most important take-away from the Movement and how it can inspire artists in the new millennium—the empowering “call-to-action” to get out there and create work, as Brother Malcom X famously said, “by any means necessary.” Hopefully, it will be work that brings about social change. I believe that social change is what Baraka wanted for Black America and why he took, as he said, “the political road.” I think he knew that all politics is local—who our mayors are, our district attorney’s, our prosecutors and our judges—elections that most Americans do not give as much importance or attention to as they do our presidential elections. I received an informal email from Baraka asking for contributions to his son’s political campaign for Mayor. In true style he said, “This has been a major struggle to get our second son, Ras, to this point where he can meaningfully challenge the rule of the Corporate Lords and corrupt power brokers” (Baraka).

I recently heard Ras Baraka, Amiri and (his second wife) poet Amina Baraka’s son, speak at National Action Network’s “Justice for All” March in Washington, DC. Reverend Al Sharpton called this march in response to the recent grand jury decisions not to indict the police officers who killed Eric Garner of Staten Island, NY and Michael Brown of Ferguson, Missouri, as well as the shooting-death of a yet another black male, twelve-year-old Tamir Rice. Ras Baraka, an activist-turned-politician and the newly elected Mayor of Newark, NJ was one of the speakers. In his speech he recalled the last words of chokehold victim Eric Garner, “I can’t breathe,” that the protestors had been chanting that day. Mayor Baraka said, “We say we ‘can’t breathe’ because we are tired of Jim Crow Justice in America. We are out here today to say we will fight back. We will stand up.” Amiri’s son, Mayor Baraka, has in fact taken the political road to fight the fight his dad had dedicated his life to—a fight called, “Black Lives Matter.”

Another famous sexist, Aristophanes, would probably turn over in his grave at the modern understanding and interpretation of his play, *Lysistrata*, to which modern-day audiences have assigned it. *Lysistrata* was meant to be a comedy about women withholding sex from men to stop the on-going war between Sparta and Athens, but women today take the call-to-action issued in *Lysistrata* quite seriously. The play has emerged as a forerunner of women’s rights, giving a voice to voiceless women. I am sure Aristophanes would be shocked that his play has captured the imagination of women today who have actually employed his strategy in a war between the sexes for the greater good. I am reminded of how, in May of 2009, concerned about post-election violence against women—with the support of the wives of Kenya’s Prime Minister Odinga and President Kibaki—proposed a week-long sex strike to as a way to protest the

growing division within the coalition government and to advocate for reform (Adesioye). They were so resolved in their mission they reached out to sex workers, offering to pay them to join their cause rather than accepting payment from their male customers for sex.

So, what am I saying ultimately? Is Baraka specifically, and the Black Arts Movement more generally, guilty of sexism and misogyny? Yes, but that doesn't mean you have to throw the baby out with the bathwater!

Out of My Comfort Zone

Against the backdrop of the 1960's, *Bridge to Baraka*, is the journey of the daughter of an absentee Black Muslim father and a bourgeois Baptist mother, who flees the margins of the black experience in America to challenge long-held beliefs that she "is not black enough to recite a black poem." All roads lead to the recitation of "the seminal poem of the Black Arts Movement," Amiri Baraka's incendiary, *Black Art*. Martin Denton, who reviewed an early performance of my play for nytheatre.com said, "Heyliger has clearly carved out a successful life for herself since [Cosby Show] as an actor and then playwright/activist—she's a notable campaigner for parity for women playwrights on the American Stage." He later published *Bridge to Baraka* on his site, www.indietheaternow.com and, as part of its promotion shared, "I had the pleasure of seeing Yvette perform an earlier version of this play at Planet Connections Theatre Festivity a couple of years ago, so I am thrilled that she has brought this expanded script to ITN. It's funny, unflinchingly honest, and like all good art, it is going to put a lot of people outside their comfort zone."

Comfort zone. I think we can all agree that the words, "comfort zone" and "Black Arts Movement" do not belong in the same sentence—even for me, an artist and black, who is inspired by this literary movement. *Bridge to Baraka* was taking me in a surprising and unsettling direction, decidedly way out of my "comfort zone." While going through Uptown/Downtown's Fieldwork process of developing work, I had many moments of doubt and confusion, making the development of *Bridge to Baraka* an uneasy process. In fact, I had considered more than once ceasing work on the script. Anyone that knows my work knows that I am no stranger to controversy, yet I had never experienced this type of discomfort and uncertainty over the work I was putting into the world before. I am well aware that you can't create freely, burdened by these kinds of concerns. But I was.

My upset essentially revolved around the very real possibility of offending family, friends, comrades, potential producing partners and funding sources—not with my personal story, but with the inclusion of Amiri Baraka's poem, *Black Art*, in *Bridge to Baraka*. It was already clear to me that I may have offended some Jewish members of Uptown/Downtown from what I could glean from their comments and questions about the work—questions like, "Is there another poem that could be used?" Or, "I want to hear more from Yvette X. Doesn't she have a poem?" But, *Black Art* was the major poetic manifesto of the Black Arts Movement. I felt I had to use it, even though I had a very real concern that Baraka's poem would drown out the nascent message of my play—whatever it would become and was destined to be.

So, I went back and forth about taking *Black Art* out of the play altogether. One day it came to me how to keep the poem within the play with (what I felt was) an ingenious device designed to buffer the poem for today's multicultural audiences and "prevent a possible fight or flight response on their part." An Oath. This Oath, taken by the audience during the performance, issued the warning that, "some of the writing of the Black Arts Movement was not for the faint of heart and was felt by many to be reverse racist, sexist, homophobic, anti-Semitic,

separatist, and generally inflammatory—but it was also a means of self-defense.” The Oath would conclude with the audience swearing “not to shoot the messenger,” (yours truly!) It seemed to me a perfect fix, yet it was felt by some that, in and of itself, the Oath was not enough to offset the negative reaction that the inclusion of *Black Art* in my play would engender.

As I mentioned, Uptown/Downtown culminated in a showing of our works-in-progress at both an Uptown venue and a Downtown venue. After the performance at the (downtown) Chen Center, I emailed Kay Takeda the Director, Grants and Services at the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council. As you will recall, it was through their performance artist workshop in conjunction with The Field and the Harlem Arts Alliance that I had the opportunity to write *Bridge to Baraka*. I told Takeda that I was strongly considering not doing the poem for the performance at the (uptown) Dance Theatre of Harlem. I explained that just because I was looking at the Black Arts Movement through an educational/historical lens, didn't mean I couldn't expect others to do the same. Ms. Takeda said, “I'm sorry to hear you're thinking about taking out the poem. The complexity of identity—isn't that much of what the piece prepares us for and leads us through? I really believe in both the poem for what it is, and what it dreams of, and in you claiming it through your work. The Oath is key to positioning the piece. But, it is of course your decision, and your decision alone to make, as you have to feel right about the work” (Takeda).

The lesson I learned from Takeda was fueled by the universal lesson of the Black Arts Movement itself. It is that, as artists, we must have the courage to tell our own stories, our way, regardless of what people think. I was getting support from both the Fieldwork process and the spirit of the play itself. I plowed through, making adjustments here and there in the piece in order to ensure that my intention as a writer was clear. Fieldwork allowed me the space to keep Baraka's poem as part of the play until I could decide what I, the artist, wanted to do. Through Fieldwork I understood that it was a decision that only I, alone, could and should make. This is the beauty of Fieldwork as a method for developing new work—that I could fully explore my vision for the piece. In another circumstance, I might have given in to my desire to not offend, harm or make anyone uncomfortable (including myself!).

Writing as Self-Defense

In spite of the scuttle around *Black Art*, I was fascinated by the opportunity that I was presented with to examine the poem through a personal/educational/historical lens in a theatrical setting and decided to move forward. It greatly helped to understand what was happening in our country when the poem was written and I added this context to the play. The 1960's was a very challenging time for race relations in our country. What is often misunderstood about this brief but impactful artistic and cultural movement is the reason behind the militant writing that was erupting onto the literary scene. Black people were being killed in America at will and black leaders were being assassinated—Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Jr., as well as those that were sympathetic to the plight of black people, like Jack and Bobby Kennedy. Amiri Baraka commented, “When I was writing plays then our lives were in danger. Those plays were self-defense more than anything else. I'd already gotten my head split open; my teeth knocked out by the police, locked up and so forth in Newark. That's why we took the political road; that's why we started trying to elect people to office” (Pace).

Baraka's poem, *Black Art*, manages to take a retaliatory shot at everybody—regardless of race, religion, gender, or job title. No one is safe who was not onboard with the Black

Nationalist agenda that was spreading in popularity at that time—not half-white politicians, dope-sellers, mulatto women, Irish policemen, or the owner-Jews found in Baraka’s poem. In my play I explain this Nationalist agenda as “the achievement of political, economic, social, and cultural autonomy of black people in America; the restoration of racial pride; and last but not least, the achieving of solidarity with our brothers and sisters around the world who not only share our ancestral roots in the Mother Land, but the experience of systematic oppression at the hands of The Man, as well.”

In 2011, I emailed Amiri Baraka, explaining that I recite his poem in my show and asked if I could re-print *Black Art* in its entirety within my script. To my surprise and delight, he wrote back giving me permission to do so, saying: “Just follow the poem with the citation: ‘With permission of the author.’ OK. Good Luck! Amiri B.” (Baraka). I was thrilled (based on past experience with him), but I also knew that the decision to include the poem in my show remained risky. As you heard from the early responses, there was no guarantee that audiences would go along for the ride. However, I thought that perhaps with more development of the play—and couched in the context of my personal story as an African American female artist coming-of-age—the recitation of the poem would be understood and accepted as an important factor in the evolution of my particular American journey.

As an interesting footnote to the controversy around *Black Art* and Baraka’s anti-Semitism, I happened upon an article called, “In Defense of Amiri Baraka,” by Joshua Furst that was published in *The Jewish Daily Forward* after Baraka’s death. In it I learned something surprising. Furst writes:

By the late 70s and early 80s, he’d come to regret, and repudiate, the anti-Semitism of his Black Nationalist period.
....I’m not defending Baraka’s anti-Semitic rhetoric. But I ask you, dear reader, to withhold judgment long enough to see it in the context of his long career as an artist, activist and cultural critic. I ask you to allow him to change his mind (as every engaged citizen sometimes does) and to acknowledge his accomplishments as well as his failings. I’m asking you to recognize the discomfort he inspires as a challenge to take his larger message seriously, to reconsider how far we’ve travelled since the 1950s, what’s been lost, what’s been gained, and who’s really benefited (Furst).

Not Black Enough to Be In the Slave Ship

As I touched on earlier, I grew up part of the middleclass bourgeoisie in Washington, DC and this backdrop creates dramatic tension within *Bridge to Baraka*. A high school student and theatre major at Duke Ellington School of the Arts, I now see that we were the heirs-apparent of the black theater movement of the 60’s. Choreographer and teacher, the late Mike Malone (who would later become the first principal of Duke Ellington School of the Arts) was credited with ushering in the black theater movement to Washington, DC. The late director and teacher, Glenda Dickerson, was the head of the Theatre Department.

Under Glenda’s instruction we learned about her special brand of Black Theatre through her non-linear, ritualistic directorial style that incorporated black poetry and movement in what

she called, a Living Library. Unfortunately, I rather quickly discovered that I wasn't "black enough" for this type of theatre. The dramatic ark of *Bridge to Baraka*, begins with the statement, "I didn't know until recently that I was black enough to recite a black poem" and follows my evolution from childhood, to my teenage years as an acting student, to the discovery of the Black Arts Movement as adult (student), to the moment of being able to recite Baraka's incendiary, *Black Art*. As I explain in *Bridge to Baraka*:

Now, it's my guess that unbeknownst to the school board, Glenda Dickerson, the head of the theatre department at the time, was on a mission beyond training us as actors. That mission was to reveal and give back to us misguided and misinformed public school students, our very own black selves. This mission was revolutionary in Chocolate City—it was right up there with teaching slaves how to read....

My blackness is the beauty of this land. My blackness, tender and strong, wounded and wise; my blackness is the beauty of this land.

That was the mantra of the theatre department and our training as actors was all about discovering what that mantra meant. We learned theatre-making techniques that were Afrocentric, non-linear and ritualistic. Our bodies were our instruments.

Movement class had nothing to do with pointing your toes, and voice class had nothing to do with talking—we made all kinds of sounds from here (indicating her diaphragm), from the gut, that were not appropriate to make in polite company. We were given "improvisation" exercises designed to re-live and remember our collective history as African people who were stolen from the Motherland. Through these improvisations we were transported from the 1970's to the 1770's....

Nothing in my bourgeois assimilationist background had prepared me for this improvisation. I looked around and deduced, "I'm not black enough to be in the slave ship!" Worst of all, I began to believe it; to accept it as true (Heyliger).

Personally liberated as an artist by the spirit of the Black Arts Movement, my fears and misgivings about including *Black Art* in the play were giving way to a voice growing louder within which demanded that I tell my story, my way. This meant keeping in Baraka's poem, a poem from a historical period and style of performing that I was NEVER given the opportunity to participate in growing up as an artist, and didn't dare attempt on my own for fear of rejection and further marginalization. I kicked a door open and went to a place where I was not welcome, and in some situations, still am not. Yvette X declares triumphantly, "I am black enough to recite a Black poem!" I realized that it was never about the poem or the inflammatory things the poem said. It was always about Yvette's issues of identity—whether or not Yvette thought Yvette was black enough to recite a black poem, much less write or perform for the Black Theatre. It was about undoing *years* of being told I wasn't black enough; about rejecting those old beliefs, claiming my birthright and standing in my blackness.

Larry Neal in his essay, “Any Day Now: Black Art and Black Liberation,” found in the book *Black Poets and Prophets*, defines *Black Art* this way: “An art that opens us up to the beauty and ugliness within us; that makes us understand our condition and each other in a more profound manner; that unites us, exposing us to our painful weaknesses and strengths; and finally, an art that posits for us the Vision of a Liberated Future” (154 – 155). *Bridge to Baraka* does just this—exposes a painful past due to what I now understand to be an old problem but a new –ism, “colorism.” About.com defines it this way: “Colorism is a practice of discrimination by which those with lighter skin are treated more favorably than those with darker skin. In the African-American community, this traditionally played out via the paper bag test. Those lighter than the standard paper lunch bag were allowed entry into fraternities, sororities and other realms of black upper class life, while dark-skinned blacks were excluded.”

Despite years of what I have experienced as being a casualty of colorism—doubting if Baraka’s *SOS* call to Black people included me—the closing of *Bridge to Baraka* finds me staking my claim as a woman dramatist of color. I am forever grateful to Amiri Baraka whose Black Arts Movement has given permission for those of us coming of age today to be our own authentic black selves, to:

Create an art that was 1.) Black by form and content, as Black as Billie Holiday or as Duke Ellington. 2) An art that was mass oriented, that could move easily in and be claimed by the Black Community as a part of a Cultural Revolution. 3) We wanted art that was Revolutionary. As revolutionary as Malcolm X or the new African revolutionaries (Baraka xviii – xix).

One could easily substitute whatever box you check for race, nationality, gender or sexual preference into Baraka’s formula for a Cultural Revolution above—just change the text to fit your set of cultural circumstances. Baraka’s Cultural Revolution encapsulates what Neal has described as a “Vision of a Liberated Future.” For me this vision includes artists, particularly woman artists, inspired by the lessons that we can take from the Black Arts Movement. Neal’s Vision of a Liberated Future feels very much to me to be about freedom, inclusion and love. I was always curious how, after the violence of the first half of *Black Art*, Baraka abruptly turns on a dime to love at the end. At the close of the poem Baraka declares:

Let there be no love poems written
until love can exist freely and cleanly
Let black people understand
that they are the lovers and the sons of warriors
and sons of warriors are poems & poets
& all the loveliness here in the world
We want a black poem
And a black world
Let the world be a Black Poem
And Let All Black People Speak This Poem
Silently
or LOUD

This section almost feels like a new poem to me. But I think that perhaps, after the obliteration of injustice, the breaking of the chains of psychological bondage and post-traumatic stress disorder caused by slavery, and the end of black-on-black crime, Baraka wants for us, a

clean place to love. This is a place that is hard-won; a place that is not achieved by any other means but destruction followed by construction; a place that rises from the ashes of what it once meant to be black in America—to what it could mean to be black in America in this new millennium. Baraka is the father that wants a bright future, and a fair and just world for his children—children who understand and know their true worth; children who are free. To me the “Black World” in this poem is the Vision of a Liberated Future that Neal speaks about.

The Bottom Line

My intention as a solo artist and my hope for *Bridge to Baraka* is that it inform, liberate, inspire and move audiences to take action; to advocate for equality and increased opportunities for women theatre artists, particularly women artists of color. But for some readers, I could talk about parity for women playwrights until I am blue in the face; it wouldn't matter. What matters to them, and to producers most especially, is the bottom line. In *Bridge to Baraka*, Yvette X closes with this “bottom line” in mind:

Heck, [women] make up more than 70 percent of the ticket buying masses anyway. We bring the men to the theatre! Since we hold the purse strings, why not have more of a say about what we're dragging our husbands, boyfriends and significant others to see? Women playwrights are crammed together on the back of a bus filled with plenty of open seats for men. We don't have to fight over the few open seats that are left. We don't even have to ride that bus. We can walk—no, march to our destination. We can create our own bus (Heyliger)!

There is power in the purse strings! We must educate women about this power and encourage them to use it to support women who are making theatre. Additionally, it is my belief that legislation should be enacted whereby any theatre company that is receiving city, state or federal funding from the government should be mandated to allocate half of that funding to women theater artists across the board—playwrights, directors, designers, etc. Commercial producers, of course, will continue to produce whomever they choose, man or woman. They are the ones who are courting funders, raising the capital and taking the risk. But I believe that in the case where government monies are granted, there should be a mandate for parity in the disbursement of those dollars. Baraka is right, we're going to have to go the “political road” to get this done.

We Are the Beneficiaries

It is a blessing to have been able to learn about the Black Arts Movement as an adult. Maturity gives me both the wisdom and hindsight to see it in a larger context and instills in me a sincere desire not to, as I said, “throw the baby out with the bathwater.” When Uptown/Downtown concluded, I continued to develop *Bridge to Baraka*, work shopping the piece over the ensuing four years. I continued my reflection on the meaning of the Black Arts Movement and its relationship to my work as an African American women dramatist in the new millennium; a woman who is writing for the theatre in an environment where women's work is seldom produced by traditional gatekeepers. *Bridge to Baraka* is a springboard to talk about these issues and others, and to share my personal story as a way into understanding these issues.

The legacy of the Black Arts Movement is that we not take for granted the right to tell our own story—to put the power back in our pens. This was not always the case in America for women or for people of color. Before the 1960's, the canon of American literature was not diverse and there was no interest in making it so by including other voices. The Black Arts Movement changed all that and we are the beneficiaries. The Black Arts Movement has given me the chutzpah not only to keep moving forward as a producing artist, but to tell my story against the backdrop of lack of parity for women in the American Theatre. So, I write the plays I want to write and to sign my name, a woman's name, to them. As I begin to tour *Bridge to Baraka*, it is my hope that audiences will be inspired to tell their own stories, their own way and get those stories to the masses... "by any means necessary." The understanding and appreciation of this freedom is at the heart of the message of *Bridge to Baraka*.

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